Transcript – The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara, 2004

[McNamara] Is this chart at a reasonable height? Or do you want it lowered? Earlier tonight — let me first ask the T.V., are you ready? All set?

Let me hear your voice level to make sure it's the same.

[Errol Morris] Okay, how's my voice level?

[RSM] That's fine.


[RSM] Now I remember exactly the sentence I left off on. I remember how it started, and I was cut off in the middle. But you can fix it up some way. I don't want to go back, introduce the sentence, because I know exactly what I wanted to say.

[EM] Go ahead!

[RSM] Okay. 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. He's killed people unnecessarily — his own troops or other troops — through mistakes, through errors of judgment. A hundred, or thousands, or tens of thousands, maybe even a hundred thousand. But, he hasn't destroyed nations.

And the conventional wisdom is don't make the same mistake twice, learn from your mistakes. And we all do. Maybe we make the same mistake three times, but hopefully not four or five. They'll be no learning period with nuclear weapons. You make one mistake and you're going to destroy nations.

In my life, I've been part of wars. 3 years in the U.S. Army during World War II. 7 years as Secretary of Defense during the Vietnam War. 13 years at the World Bank across the world. At my age, 85, I'm at age where I can look back and derive some conclusions about my actions. My rule has been try to learn, try to understand what happened. Develop the lessons and pass them on.

McNamara and the Pentagon

[Harry Reasoner] This is the Secretary of Defense of the United States, Robert McNamara. His department absorbs 10% of the national income of this country, and over half of every tax dollar. His job has been called the toughest in Washington, and McNamara is the most controversial figure that has ever held the job. Walter Lippmann calls him not only the best Secretary of
Defense, but the first one who ever asserted civilian control over the military. His critics call him "a con—man," "an IBM machine with legs," "an arrogant dictator."

Mr. Secretary, I've noticed in several cabinet offices that little silver calendar thing there. Can you explain that?

[RSM] Yes, this was given by President Kennedy. On the calendar are engraved the dates: October 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, and finally 28, were the dates when we literally looked down the gun barrel into nuclear war.

Lesson #1: Empathize with your enemy.

Under a cloak of deceit, the Soviet Union introduced nuclear missiles into Cuba, targeting 90 million Americans. The C.I.A. said the warheads had not been delivered yet. They thought 20 were coming on a ship named the Poltava. We mobilized 180,000 troops. The first day's air attack was planned at 1080 sorties, a huge air attack.

October 16, 1962

[J F Kennedy] In the next 24 hours, what is it we need to do?

[RSM] Mr. President, we need to do two things, it seems to me. First, we need to develop a specific strike plan. The second thing we have to do is to consider the consequences. I don't know quite what kind of a world we'll live in after we've struck Cuba. How do we stop at that point? I don't know the answer to this.

[JFK] The chances of this becoming a much broader struggle are increased as you step up the talk about danger to the United States.

[RSM] Kennedy was trying to keep us out of war. I was trying to help him keep up out of war. And General Curtis LeMay, whom I served under as a matter of fact in World War II, was saying "Let's go in, let's totally destroy Cuba."

On that critical Saturday, October 27th, we had two Khrushchev messages in front of us. One had come in Friday night, and it had been dictated by a man who was either drunk or under tremendous stress. Basically, he said, "If you'll guarantee you won't invade Cuba, we'll take the missiles out."

Then before we could respond, we had a second message that had been dictated by a bunch of hard—liners. And it said, in effect, "If you attack, we're prepared to confront you with masses of military power."

So, what to do? We had, I'll call it, the soft message and the hard message.
At the elbow of President Kennedy was Tommy Thompson, former U.S. Ambassador to Moscow. He and Jane, his wife, had literally lived with Khrushchev and his wife upon occasion. Tommy Thompson said, "Mr. President, I urge you to respond to the soft message."

The President said to Tommy, "We can't do that, that'll get us nowhere."

Tommy said, "Mr. President, you're wrong." Now that takes a lot of guts.

October 27, 1962

[JFK] We're not going to get these missiles out of Cuba, probably anyway, by negotiation.

[Thompson] I don't agree, Mr. President. I think there's still a chance.

[JFK] That he'll back down?

[LT] The important thing for Khrushchev, it seems to me, is to be able to say, "I saved Cuba, I stopped an invasion."

[RSM] In Thompson's mind was this thought: Khrushchev's gotten himself in a hell of a fix. He would then think to himself, "My God, if I can get out of this with a deal that I can say to the Russian people: 'Kennedy was going to destroy Castro and I prevented it.'" Thompson, knowing Khrushchev as he did, thought Khrushchev will accept that. And Thompson was right.

That's what I call empathy. We must try to put ourselves inside their skin and look at us through their eyes, just to understand the thoughts that lie behind their decisions and their actions.

Khrushchev's advisors were saying, "There can be no deal unless you somewhat reduce the pressure on us, when you ask us to reduce the pressure on you."

[EM] Also, we had attempted to invade Cuba.

[RSM] Well, with the Bay of Pigs. That undoubtedly influenced their thinking, I think that's correct. But, more importantly, from a Cuban and a Russian point of view, they knew what in a sense I really didn't know: we had attempted to assassinate Castro under Eisenhower and under Kennedy and later under Johnson. And in addition to that, major voices in the U.S. were calling for invasion.

In the first message, Khrushchev said this: "We and you ought not to pull on the ends of a rope which you have tied the knots of war. Because the more the two of us pull, the tighter the knot will be tied. And then it will be necessary to cut that knot, and what that would mean is not for me to explain to you. I have participated in two wars and know that war ends when it has rolled through cities and villages, everywhere sowing death and destruction. For such is the logic of war. If people do not display wisdom, they will clash like blind moles and then mutual annihilation will commence."
Lesson #2: Rationality will not save us.

[RSM] I want to say, and this is very important: at the end we lucked out. It was luck that prevented nuclear war. We came that close to nuclear war at the end. Rational individuals: Kennedy was rational; Khrushchev was rational; Castro was rational. Rational individuals came that close to total destruction of their societies. And that danger exists today.

The major lesson of the Cuban missile crisis is this: the indefinite combination of human fallibility and nuclear weapons will destroy nations. Is it right and proper that today there are 7500 strategic offensive nuclear warheads, of which 2500 are on 15 minute alert, to be launched by the decision of one human being?

It wasn't until January, 1992, in a meeting chaired by Castro in Havana, Cuba, that I learned 162 nuclear warheads, including 90 tactical warheads, were on the island at the time of this critical moment of the crisis. I couldn't believe what I was hearing, and Castro got very angry with me because I said, "Mr. President, let's stop this meeting. This is totally new to me, I'm not sure I got the translation right."

"Mr. President, I have three questions to you. Number one: did you know the nuclear warheads were there? Number two: if you did, would you have recommended to Khrushchev in the face of an U.S. attack that he use them? Number three: if he had used them, what would have happened to Cuba?"

He said, "Number one, I knew they were there. Number two, I would not have recommended to Khrushchev, I did recommend to Khrushchev that they be used. Number three, 'What would have happened to Cuba?' It would have been totally destroyed." That's how close we were.

[EM] And he was willing to accept that?

[RSM] Yes, and he went on to say: "Mr. McNamara, if you and President Kennedy had been in a similar situation, that's what you would have done." I said, "Mr. President, I hope to God we would not have done it. Pull the temple down on our heads? My God!"

In a sense, we'd won. We got the missiles out without war. My deputy and I brought the five Chiefs over and we sat down with Kennedy. And he said, "Gentlemen, we won. I don't want you ever to say it, but you know we won, I know we won."

And LeMay said, "Won? Hell, we lost. We should go in and wipe 'em out today."

LeMay believed that ultimately we're going to confront these people in a conflict with nuclear weapons. And, by God, we better do it when we have greater superiority than we will have in the future.

At the time, we had a 17 to 1 strategic advantage in nuclear numbers. We'd done 10 times as many tests as they had. We were certain we could maintain that advantage if we limited the tests. The Chiefs we're all opposed. They said, "The Soviets will cheat." I said, "How will they cheat?" You
won't believe this, but they said, "They'll test them behind the moon." I said, "You're out of your minds." I said, "That's absurd."

It's almost impossible for our people today to put themselves back into that period. In my 7 years as Secretary, we came within a hair's breath of war with the Soviet Union on three different occasions. 24 hours a day, 365 days a year for 7 years as Secretary of Defense, I lived the Cold War.

During the Kennedy administration, they designed a 100 megaton bomb. It was tested in the atmosphere. I remember this. Cold War? Hell, it was a hot war!

I think the human race needs to think more about killing, about conflict. Is that what we want in this 21st Century?

1918

[RSM] My earliest memory is of a city exploding with joy. It was November 11, 1918. I was two years old. You may not believe that I have the memory, but I do. I remember the tops of the streetcars being crowded with human beings cheering and kissing and screaming. End of World War I? we'd won. But also celebrating the belief of many Americans? particularly Woodrow Wilson — we’d fought a war to end all wars. His dream was that the world could avoid great wars in the future. Disputes among great nations would be resolved.

I also remember that I wasn't allowed to go outdoors to play with my friends without wearing a mask. There was an un—Godly flu epidemic. Large numbers of Americans were dying. 600,000 and millions across the world.

My class in the first grade was housed in a shack. A wooden shack. But we had an absolutely superb teacher. And this teacher gave a test to the class every month, and she reseated the class based on the results of that test. There were vertical rows, and she put the person with the highest grade in the first seat on the left—hand row. And I worked my tail off to be in that first seat.

Now the majority of the classmates were Whites, Caucasians, so on? Wasps if you will. But my competition for that first seat were Chinese, Japanese, and Jews. On Saturday and Sunday, I went and played with my classmates. They went to their ethnic schools. They learned their native language, they learned their culture, their history. And they came back determined on Monday to beat that damn Irishman. But, they didn't do it very often.

[HR] One Congressman called you "Mr. I—have—all—the—answers McNamara."
And there's been suggestion from some Congressman that you come up there ... in spite of the weight of their experience ... prepared to give them simple, little lessons in things. Is that your attitude?

[RSM] No. Perhaps I don't know how much I don't know, and there is much indeed. I do make a serious effort to prepare myself properly for these Congressional discussions. I suppose I spend
perhaps a 100 or 120 hours in testifying before Congress each year. And each hour of testimony requires 3 to 4 hours of preparation.

[HR] What about the contention that your attitude is sometimes arrogant, that you never admit that you were wrong. Have you ever been wrong, sir?

[RSM] Oh, yes indeed. I'm not going to tell you. If you don't know, I'm not going to tell you? oh, on countless occasions.

I applied to Stanford University. I very much wanted to go. But, I couldn't afford it, so I lived at home and I went to Berkeley. $52 dollars a year tuition. I started Berkeley in the bottom of the depression. 25 million males were unemployed.

Out of that class of 3500, three elected to Phi Beta Kappa at the end of the Sophomore year. Of those three, one became a Rhodes Scholar. I went to Harvard. The third went to work for $65 dollars a month and was damn happy to have the job.

The Society was on the verge of [...] I don't want to say "revolution." Although, had President Roosevelt not done some of the things he did, it could have become far more violent. In any event, that was what I was thrown into.

I never heard of Plato and Aristotle before I became a Freshman at Berkley. And I remember Professor Lowenberg — the Freshman philosophy professor? I couldn't wait to go to another class.

**Lesson #3: There's something beyond one's self.**

[RSM] I took more philosophy classes [...] particularly one in logic and one in ethics. Stress on values and something beyond one's self, and a responsibility to society.

After graduating University of California I went to Harvard graduate school of business for two years and then I went back to San Francisco.

I began to court this young lady that I'd met when we were 17 in our first week at Berkley: Margaret Craig. And I was making some progress after eight or nine months. I proposed and she accepted.

She went with her aunt and her mother on a trip across the country. She telegraphed me?"Must order engraved invitations to include your middle name, what is it?"

And I wired back, "My middle name is 'Strange.'"

And she said "I know it's 'strange,' but what is it?"

Well, I mean it is Strange, it's Robert Strange McNamara.
And it was a marriage made in heaven. At the end of a year we had our first child. The delivery costs were $100, and we paid that $10 a month. Those were some of the happiest days of our life. And then the war came.

I’d been promoted to assistant professor — I was the youngest assistant professor at Harvard? and a salary by the way of $4000 a year. Harvard business school’s market was drying up? the males were being drafted or volunteering. So the Dean, being farsighted, brought back a government contract to establish an officer candidate school for what was called "Statistical Control" in the Air Force.

We said to the Air Force, "Look, we’re not going to take anybody you send up here. We’re going to select the people. You have a punch card for every human being brought into the Air Corps. We’re going to run those cards through the IBM sorting machines, and we’re going to sort on age, education, accomplishments, grades, etc." We were looking for the best and the brightest. The best brains, the greatest capacity to lead, the best judgment.

The U.S. was just beginning to bomb. We were bombing by daylight. The loss rate was very, very high, so they commissioned a study. And what did we find? We found the abort rate was 20%. 20% of the planes that took off to bomb targets in Germany turned around before they got to their target. Well that was a hell of a mess? we lost 20% of our capability right there.

The form, I think it was form 1—A or something like that was a mission report. And if you aborted a mission you had to write down ‘why.’ So we get all these things and we analyze them, and we finally concluded it was baloney. They were aborting out of fear.

Because the loss rate was 4% per sortie, the combat tour was 25 sorties — it didn't mean that 100% of them were going to be killed but a hell of a lot of them were going to be killed. They knew that and they found reasons to not go over the target. So we reported this.

One of the commanders was Curtis LeMay — Colonel in command of a B—24 group. He was the finest combat commander of any service I came across in war. But he was extraordinarily belligerent, many thought brutal. He got the report. He issued an order. He said, "I will be in the lead plane on every mission. Any plane that takes off will go over the target, or the crew will be court—marshaled." The abort rate dropped over night.

Now that’s the kind of commander he was.

[Announcer] Ladies and Gentlemen, the President of the United States.

[F D Roosevelt] My friends, on this Christmas Eve, there are over ten million men in the Armed Forces of the United States alone. One year ago, one million, seven hundred thousand were serving overseas. By next July 1st, that number will rise to over five million. Plenty of bad news for the Japs in the not too far distant future.

Lesson #4: Maximize Efficiency.
The U.S. Air Force had a new airplane named the B—29. The B—17s and B—24s in Europe bombed from 15,000, 16,000 feet. The problem was they were subject to anti-aircraft fire and to fighter aircraft. To relieve that, this B—29 was being developed that bombed from high altitude and it was thought we could destroy targets much more efficiently and effectively.

I was brought back from the 8th Air Force and assigned to the first B—29s, the 58th Bomb Wing. We had to fly those planes from the bases in Kansas to India. Then we had to fly fuel over the hump into China.

The airfields were built with Chinese labour. It was an insane operation. I can still remember hauling these huge rollers to crush the stone and make them flat. A long rope, somebody would slip. The roller would roll over, everybody would laugh and go on.

We were supposed to take these B—29s? there were no tanker aircraft there. We were to fill them with fuel, fly from India to Chengtu; offload the fuel; fly back to India; make enough missions to build up fuel in Chengtu; fly to Yawata, Japan; bomb the steel mills; and go back to India.

We had so little training on this problem of maximizing efficiency, we actually found to get some of the B—29s back instead of offloading fuel, they had to take it on. To make a long story short, it wasn't worth a damn. And it was LeMay who really came to that conclusion, and led the Chiefs to move the whole thing to the Marianas, which devastated Japan.

LeMay was focused on only one thing: target destruction. Most Air Force Generals can tell you how many planes they had, how many tons of bombs they dropped, or whatever the hell it was.

But, he was the only person that I knew in the senior command of the Air Force who focused solely on the loss of his crews per unit of target destruction. I was on the island of Guam in his command in March of 1945. In that single night, we burned to death 100,000 Japanese civilians in Tokyo: men, women, and children.

[EM] Were you aware this was going to happen?

[RSM] Well, I was part of a mechanism that in a sense recommended it. I analyzed bombing operations, and how to make them more efficient. i.e. Not more efficient in the sense of killing more, but more efficient in weakening the adversary.

I wrote one report analyzing the efficiency of the B—29 operations. The B—29 could get above the fighter aircraft and above the air defense, so the loss rate would be much less. The problem was the accuracy was also much less.

Now I don't want to suggest that it was my report that led to, I'll call it, the firebombing. It isn't that I'm trying to absolve myself of blame. I don't want to suggest that it was I who put in LeMay's mind that his operations were totally inefficient and had to be drastically changed. But, anyhow, that's what he did. He took the B—29s down to 5,000 feet and he decided to bomb with firebombs.

I participated in the interrogation of the B—29 bomber crews that came back that night. A room full of crewmen and intelligence interrogators. A captain got up, a young captain said:
"Goddammit, I'd like to know who the son of a bitch was that took this magnificent airplane, designed to bomb from 23,000 feet and he took it down to 5,000 feet and I lost my wingman. He was shot and killed."

LeMay spoke in monosyllables. I never heard him say more than two words in sequence. It was basically "Yes," "No," "Yup," or "The hell with it." That was all he said. And LeMay was totally intolerant of criticism. He never engaged in discussion with anybody.

He stood up. "Why are we here? Why are we here? You lost your wingman; it hurts me as much as it does you. I sent him there. And I've been there, I know what it is. But, you lost one wingman, and we destroyed Tokyo."

50 square miles of Tokyo were burned. Tokyo was a wooden city, and when we dropped these firebombs, it just burned it.

Lesson #5: Proportionality should be a guideline in war.

[EM] The choice of incendiary bombs, where did that come from?

[RSM] I think the issue is not so much incendiary bombs. I think the issue is: in order to win a war should you kill 100,000 people in one night, by firebombing or any other way? LeMay's answer would be clearly "Yes."

"McNamara, do you mean to say that instead of killing 100,000, burning to death 100,000 Japanese civilians in that one night, we should have burned to death a lesser number or none? And then had our soldiers cross the beaches in Tokyo and been slaughtered in the tens of thousands? Is that what you're proposing? Is that moral? Is that wise?"

Why was it necessary to drop the nuclear bomb if LeMay was burning up Japan? And he went on from Tokyo to firebomb other cities. 58% of Yokohama. Yokohama is roughly the size of Cleveland. 58% of Cleveland destroyed. Tokyo is roughly the size of New York. 51% percent of New York destroyed. 99% of the equivalent of Chattanooga, which was Toyama. 40% of the equivalent of Los Angeles, which was Nagoya. This was all done before the dropping of the nuclear bomb, which by the way was dropped by LeMay's command.

Proportionality should be a guideline in war. Killing 50% to 90% of the people of 67 Japanese cities and then bombing them with two nuclear bombs is not proportional, in the minds of some people, to the objectives we were trying to achieve.

I don't fault Truman for dropping the nuclear bomb. The U.S.—Japanese War was one of the most brutal wars in all of human history? kamikaze pilots, suicide, unbelievable. What one can criticize is that the human race prior to that time? and today? has not really grappled with what are, I'll call it, "the rules of war." Was there a rule then that said you shouldn't bomb, shouldn't kill, shouldn't burn to death 100,000 civilians in one night?

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. LeMay recognized that what he was doing
would be thought immoral if his side had lost. But what makes it immoral if you lose and not immoral if you win?

March 2, 1964

[Lyndon B. Johnson] I want you to dictate o me a memorandum of a couple of pages. Four letter words and short sentences on the situation in Vietnam, the "Vietnam Picture." This morning Senator Scott said that "The war which we can neither win, lose, nor drop is evidence of an instability of ideas. A floating series of judgments, our policy of nervous conciliation, which is extremely disturbing." Do you think it's a mistake to explain about Vietnam and what we're faced with?

[RSM] Well, I do think, Mr. President, it would be wise for you to say as little as possible. The frank answer is we don't know what is going on out there. The signs I see coming through the cables are disturbing signs. It is a very uncertain period.

March 10, 1964

[LBJ] We need somebody over there that can get us some better plans than we've got. What I want is somebody that can lay up some plans to trap these guys and whup the hell out of them. Kill some of them, that's what I want to do.

[RSM] I'll try and bring something back that will meet that objective.

[LBJ] Okay, Bob.

[EM] At some point, we have to approach Vietnam. And I want to know how you can best set that up for me?

[RSM] Yeah, well, that's a hard, hard question. I think we have to approach it in the context of the Cold War. But first, I'll have to talk about Ford. I'll have to go back to the end of the war.

1945

[RSM] I had a terrible headache so Marg drove me in to the Air Force regional hospital. A week later Marg came in — many of the same symptoms. It's hard to believe and I don't think I've ever heard of another case where two individuals [...] husband and wife ? came down essentially at the same time with polio. We were both in the hospital with on VJ day.

I had to pay the bills and they were very heavy. And a friend of mine said, "We're going to find a corporation in America that needs the advice and capabilities of this extraordinary group of people I'm going to bring together and you've got to be a part of it." I said, "The hell with it. I'm not going to be a part of it. I'm going back to Harvard. That's what Marg and I want to do. I'm going to spend my life there."
He said, "Look, Bob, you can't pay Marg's hospital bills, you're crazy as hell." He said, "By the way the company that most needs our help in all the U.S. is Ford." Well, I said, "How'd you learn that?" He said, "Oh, I read in article in Life Magazine."

Of the top thousand executives at Ford Motor Company, I don't believe there were ten college graduates, and Henry Ford II needed help. They were gonna give us tests. Two full days of testing: intelligence tests, achievement tests, personality tests, you name it. This sounds absurd, but I remember one of the questions on one of the tests was: "Would you rather be a florist or a coal miner?" I should tell you, I had been a florist. I worked as a florist during some of my Christmas vacations. I put down "coal miner." I think the reasons are obvious to you.

This group of ten people had been trained in the officer candidate school at Harvard. In some tests we actually had the highest marks that had ever been scored. In other tests, we were in the upper one percentile.

From 1926 to 1946? including the war years? Ford Motor Company just barely broke even. It was a God—awful mess. I thought we had a responsibility to the stockholders and God knows you cannot believe how bad the situation had been.

Lesson #6: Get the data.

[RSM] They didn't have a market research organization. I set one up. The manager said to me, "What do you want me to study?" I said, "Find out who in the hell's buying the Volkswagons. Everybody says it's a no good car. It was only selling about twenty thousand a year, but I want to know what's going to happen. Is it going to stay the same, or go down, or go up? Find out who buy's it."

He came back six months later, he said, "Well, they're professors, and they're doctors and they're lawyers, and they're obviously people who can afford more."

Well, that set me to thinking about what we in the industry should do. Was there a market we were missing? At this time nobody believed that Americans wanted cheaper cars. They wanted conspicuous consumption. Cadillac, with these huge ostentatious fins, set the style for the industry for ten or fifteen years. And that's what we were up against.

We introduced the Falcon as a more economical car, and it was a huge success profit—wise. We accomplished a lot.

I said, "What about accidents, I hear a lot about accidents." "Oh yes, we'll get you some data on that." There were about forty odd thousand deaths per year from automobile accidents, and about a million, or a million two injuries.

I said, "Well, what causes it? "Well," he said, "it's obvious. It's human error and mechanical failure." I said, "Hell, it's mechanical failure, we might be involved. Let's dig into this." I want to know, if it's mechanical error, I want to stop it. Well, they said, "There's really very few statistics available." I said, "Dammit, find out what can we learn."
They said, "Well, the only place we can find that knows anything about it is Cornell Aeronautical Labs." They said, "The major problem is packaging." They said, "You buy eggs and you know how eggs come in a carton?" I said, "No, I don't buy eggs — I never — my wife does it." Well, they said, "You talk to her and ask her: when she puts that carton down on the drain board when she gets home, do the eggs break?" And so I asked Marg and she said "No." So Cornell said, "They don't break because they're packaged properly. Now if we packaged people in cars the same way, we could reduce the breakage."

We lacked lab facilities, so we dropped the human skulls in different packages down the stairwells of the dormitories at Cornell. Well, that sounds absurd, but that guy was absolutely right. It was packaging which could make the difference.

In a crash, the driver was often impaled on the steering wheel. The passenger was often injured because he'd hit the windshield or the header bar or the instrument panel. So, in the 1956 model Ford we introduced steering wheels that prevented being impaled; we introduced padded instrument panels; and, we introduced seatbelts. We estimated if there would be 100% use of the seatbelts, we could save twenty odd thousand lives a year. Everybody was opposed to it. You couldn't get people to use seatbelts, but those who did saved their lives.

Now let me jump ahead. It's July, 1960. John Bugas, vice-president, industrial relations, clearly had his eyes on becoming President. I'm the group vice-president in charge of all the car divisions. Henry was a night owl. He always wanted to go out on the town. You know, it's 2 AM or something or other. He said, 'Bob, come on up and have a nightcap.' I said, "Goddammit Henry I don't want a nightcap, I'm going to bed." John said, "I'll come up, Henry." Henry said, "I didn't ask you John, I asked Bob." He said, "Bob, come on up." So I finally went up [...] that's when he asked me to be president.

I was the first president of the company [...] in the history of the company — that had ever been president other than a member of the Ford family. And after 5 weeks I quit.

The telephone rang, a person comes on and says: "I'm Robert Kennedy. My brother, Jack Kennedy, would like you to meet our brother—in—law, Sargent Shriver." 4 o'clock Sarge comes in [...] never met him. "I've been authorized by my brother—in—law, Jack Kennedy, to offer you the position of Secretary of the Treasury."

I said, "You're out of your mind." I know a little bit about finance. But I'm not qualified to be Secretary of the Treasury." "Anticipating you might say that, the President—Elect authorized me to offer you the Secretary of Defense."

I said, "Look, I was in World War II for three years. Secretary of Defense? I'm not qualified to be Secretary of Defense." "Well," he said, "anticipating that," he said, "would you at least do him the courtesy of agreeing to meet with him?"

So I go home. I meet with Marg. If I could appoint every senior official in the department, and then if I could be guaranteed I wouldn't have to be part of that damn Washington social world.
She said, "Well, okay, why don't you write a contract with the President, and if he'll accept those two conditions, do it." We total net worth at the time was on the order of $800,000, but I had huge unfulfilled stock options worth millions.

And I was one of the highest paid executives in the world. And the future was of course brilliant. We had called our children in. Their life would be totally changed. The salary of a cabinet Secretary then was $25,000 a year. So we explained to the children that they'd be giving up a few things. They could care less. Marg could care less.

It was snowing. The Secret Service took me in to the house by the back way. I can still see it. There's a love seat, two armchairs with a lamp table in between. Jack Kennedy is sitting in one armchair and Bobby Kennedy's sitting in the other. "Mr. President, it's absurd, I'm not qualified."

"Look, Bob," he said, "I don't think there's any school for Presidents either." He said, "Let's announce it right now." He said, "I'll write out the announcement."

So he wrote out the announcement, we walk out the front door. All of these television cameras and press, till hell wouldn't have it. That's how Marg learned I had accepted. It was on television [...] live.

Kennedy: All right, why don't we do some pictures afterwards. I've asked Robert McNamara to assume the responsibilities of Secretary of Defense. And I'm glad and happy to say that he has accepted this responsibility. Mr. McNamara leaves the presidency of the Ford Company at great personal sacrifice.

McNamara: That's the way it began. You know, it was a traumatic period. My wife probably got ulcers from it ? may have even ultimately died from the stress. My son got ulcers. It was very traumatic, but they were some of the best years of our life and all members of my family benefited from it. It was terrific.

1963

October 2nd. I had returned from Vietnam. At that time, we had 16,000 military advisors. I recommended to President Kennedy and the Security Council that we establish a plan and an objective of removing all of them within two years.

October 2nd, 1963

[JFK] The advantage to taking them out is?

[RSM] We can say to the Congress and people that we do have a plan for reducing the exposure of U.S. combat personnel.

[JFK] My only reservation about it is if the war doesn't continue to go well, it will look like we were overly optimistic.
We need a way to get out of Vietnam, and this is a way of doing it.

Kennedy announced we were going to pull out all of our military advisors by the end of '65 and we were going to take 1000 out by the end of '63 and we did. But, there was a coup in South Vietnam. Diem was overthrown and he and his brother were killed.

I was present with the President when together we received information of that coup. I've never seen him more upset. He totally blanched. President Kennedy and I had tremendous problems with Diem, but my God, he was the authority, he was the head of state. And he was overthrown by a military coup. And Kennedy knew and I knew, that to some degree, the U.S. government was responsible for that.

I was in my office in the Pentagon, when the telephone rang and it was Bobby. The President had been shot in Dallas. Perhaps 45 minutes later, Bobby called again and said the President was dead. Jackie would like me to come out to the hospital. We took the body to the White House at whatever it was, 4 AM.

I called the superintendent of Arlington Cemetery. And he and I walked over those grounds. They're hauntingly beautiful grounds [...] white crosses all in a row. And, finally, I thought I'd found the exact spot, the most beautiful spot in the cemetery. I called Jackie at the White House and asked her to come out there, and she immediately accepted. And that's where the President is buried today.

A park service ranger came up to me and said that he had escorted President Kennedy on a tour of those grounds a few weeks before. And Kennedy said, "That was the most beautiful spot in Washington." That's where he's buried.

I will do my best. That is all I can do. I ask for your help and God's.

February 25, 1964

Three months after JFK's death.

Hello, Bob?

Yes, Mr. President.

I hate to modify your speech any because it's been a good one, but I just wonder if we should find two minutes in there for Vietnam?

Yeah, the problem is what to say about it.

I'll tell you what I would say about it. I would say that we have a commitment to Vietnamese freedom. We could pull out of there, the dominoes would fall, and that part of the world would go to the Communists. We could send our marines in there, and we could get tied down in a Third World War or another Korean action. Nobody really understands what it is out there. They're
asking questions and saying why don't we do more. Well, I think this: you can have more war or you can have more appeasement. But we don't want more of either. Our purpose is to train these people [the South Vietnamese] and our training's going good.

[RSM] All right, sir, I'll [...]

[LBJ] I always thought it was foolish for you to make any statements about withdrawing. I thought it was bad psychologically. But you and the President thought otherwise, and I just sat silent.

[RSM] The problem is [...]

[LBJ] Then come the questions: how in the hell does McNamara think, when he's losing a war, he can pull men out of there?

June 9, 1964

[RSM] If you went to the C.I.A. and said "How is the situation today in South Vietnam?" I think they would say it's worse. You see it in the desertion rate, you see it in the morale. You see it in the difficulty to recruit people. You see it in the gradual loss of population control.

Many of us in private would say that things are not good, they've gotten worse. Now while we say this in private and not public, there are facts available that find their way in the press. If we're going to stay in there, if we're going to go up the escalating chain, we're going to have to educate the people, Mr. President. We haven't done so yet. I'm not sure now is exactly the right time.

[LBJ] No, and I think it you start doing it they're going to be hollering, "You're a warmonger."

[RSM] I completely agree with you.

The Presidential Race: L.B.J. and Goldwater hit campaign trail.

[Goldwater] Make no bones of this. Don't try to sweep this under the rug. We are at war in Vietnam. And yet the President and his Secretary of Defense continues to mislead and misinform the American people, and enough of it's gone by.

Lesson #7: Belief and seeing are both often wrong.

August 2, 1964

On August 2nd, the destroyer Maddox reported it was attacked by a North Vietnamese patrol boat. It was an act of aggression against us. We were in international waters. I sent officials from the Defense Department out and we recovered pieces of North Vietnamese shells — that were clearly identified as North Vietnamese shells — from the deck of the Maddox. So there was no question in my mind that it had occurred. But, in any event, we didn't respond.
And it was very difficult. It was difficult for the President. There were very, very senior people, in uniform and out, who said "My God, this President is"? they didn't use the word 'coward,' but in effect? "He's not protecting the national interest."

August 4, 1964

Two days later, the Maddox and the Turner Joy, two destroyers reported they were attacked.

[LBJ] Now, where are these torpedoes coming from?

[RSM] Well, we don't know, presumably from these unidentified craft.

There were sonar soundings, torpedoes had been detected — other indications of attack from patrol boats. We spent about ten hours that day trying to find out what in the hell had happened. At one point, the commander of the ship said, "We're not certain of the attack." At another point they said, "Yes, we're absolutely positive." And then finally late in the day, Admiral Sharp said, "Yes, we're certain it happened."

So, I reported this to Johnson, and as a result there were bombing attacks on targets in North Vietnam. Johnson said we may have to escalate, and I'm not going to do it without Congressional authority. And he put forward a resolution, the language of which gave complete authority to the President to take the nation to war: The Tonkin Gulf Resolution.

Now let me go back to the August 4th attack.

August 4. 12:22 PM

[Admiral Sharp] Apparently, there have been at least nine torpedoes in the water. All missed.

[General Burchinal] Yup.

[Admiral Sharp] Wait a minute now. I'm not so sure about this number of engaged. We've got to check it out here.

97 Minutes Later.

[Admiral Sharp] He [Admiral Moore] said many of the reported contacts with torpedoes fired appear doubtful. Freak weather effects on radar and overeager sonar men may have accounted for many reports.

[General Burchinal] Okay, well I'll tell Mr. McNamara this.

[Admiral Sharp] That's the best I can give you Dave, sorry.
9 Minutes Later.

[Admiral Sharp] It does appear now that a lot of these torpedo attacks were from the sonar men, you see. And, they get keyed up with a thing like this and everything they hear on the sonar is a torpedo.

[General Burchinal] You're pretty sure there was a torpedo attack, though?

[Admiral Sharp] Oh, no doubt about that [...] I think. No doubt about that.

[RSM] It was just confusion, and events afterwards showed that our judgment that we'd been attacked that day was wrong. It didn't happen. And the judgment that we'd been attacked on August 2nd was right. We had been, although that was disputed at the time. So, we were right once and wrong once.

Ultimately, President Johnson authorized bombing in response to what he thought had been the second attack [...] it hadn't occurred but that's irrelevant to the point I'm making here. He authorized the attack on the assumption it had occurred, and his belief that it was a conscious decision on the part of the North Vietnamese political and military leaders to escalate the conflict and an indication they would not stop short of winning.

We were wrong, but we had in our minds a mindset that led to that action. And it carried such heavy costs. We see incorrectly or we see only half of the story at times.

[EM] We see what we want to believe.

[RSM] You're absolutely right. Belief and seeing, they're both often wrong.

[LBJ] We Americans know although others appear to forget the risk of spreading conflict. We still seek no wider war.

[RSM] We introduced what was called "Rolling Thunder," which over the years became a very, very heavy bombing program. Two to three times as many bombs as were dropped on Western Europe during all of World War II.

This is not primarily a military problem. It is a battle for the hearts and the minds of the people of South Vietnam. That's our objective. As a prerequisite to that, we must be able to guarantee their physical security.

February 26, 1965.

[LBJ] We're off to bombing these people. We're over that hurdle. The game now is in the 4th quarter and it's about 78 to nothing. I'm scared to death about putting ground forces in, but I'm more than frightened about losing a bunch of planes for lack of security.

[RSM] So am I.
March 6, 1965.

[LBJ] The psychological impact of "The Marines are coming" is gonna be a bad one. I know every mother is going to say, "Uh oh, this is it." What we've done with these B—57s is just gonna be Sunday School stuff compared to the marines. My answer is "yes," but my judgment is "no."

[RSM] All right, we'll take care of it, Mr. President.

[LBJ] When are you going to issue the order?

[RSM] We'll make it late today so it'll miss some of the morning editions. I'll handle it in a way that will minimize the announcement.

June 10, 1965

[RSM] [General] Westmoreland recommended additional 10 battalions, over and above the 13 you've already authorized. Something on the order of 45,000 men. I would recommend 5 battalions with the strength of about 25,000 men. Because in the back of my mind, I have a very definite limitation on commitment. And I don't think the Chiefs do. In fact, I know they don't.

[LBJ] Not a damn human thinks that 50,000 or 100,000 or 150,000 are gonna end that war. We're not getting out, but we're trying to hold what we got. And we're doing a bad?we're doing?we're?we're?we're losing at the rate we're going.

[Announcer] It was announced today that total American casualties in Vietnam now number 4877, including 748 killed.

[Harry Reasoner] Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, on each of his seven inspection trips to Vietnam has found some positive aspect of the course of the war there.

[RSM] The most vivid impression I'm bringing back is that we've stopped losing the war. The North Vietnamese today we believe have nine regiments of their regular army in South Vietnam.

[Announcer] Some of the men had little training in a state park in Kentucky before coming here. But it did not prepare them for the thicket of trees, spiked vines, thorn bushes, almost perpendicular cliffs, 90 degree temperatures, insects, and snakes

[LBJ] Now America wins the wars that she undertakes. Make no mistake about it. And we have declared war on tyranny and aggression. If this little nation goes down the drain and can't maintain her independence, ask yourself what's going to happen to all these other little nations.

December 2, 1965.
I am more and more convinced that we ought to think of some action other than military action as the only program here. I think if we do that by itself, it's suicide.

I think pushing out 300,000, 400,000 Americans out there without being able to guarantee what it will lead to is a terrible risk at a terrible cost.

Let me go back one moment. In the Cuban Missile Crisis, at the end, I think we did put ourselves in the skin of the Soviets. In the case of Vietnam, we didn't know them well enough to empathize. And there was total misunderstanding as a result. They believed that we had simply replaced the French as a colonial power, and we were seeking to subject South and North Vietnam to our colonial interests, which was absolutely absurd. And we, we saw Vietnam as an element of the Cold War. Not what they saw it as: a civil war.

1995

There aren't many examples in which you bring two former enemies together, at the highest levels, and discuss what might have been. I formed the hypothesis that each of us could have achieved our objectives without the terrible loss of life. And I wanted to test that by going to Vietnam.

The former Foreign Minister of Vietnam, a wonderful man named Thach said, "You're totally wrong. We were fighting for our independence. You were fighting to enslave us."

We almost came to blows. That was noon on the first day.

"Do you mean to say it was not a tragedy for you, when you lost 3 million 4 hundred thousand Vietnamese killed, which on our population base is the equivalent of 27 million Americans? What did you accomplish? You didn't get any more than we were willing to give you at the beginning of the war. You could have had the whole damn thing: independence, unification."

"Mr. McNamara, You must never have read a history book. If you'd had, you'd know we weren't pawns of the Chinese or the Russians. McNamara, didn't you know that? Don't you understand that we have been fighting the Chinese for 1000 years? We were fighting for our independence. And we would fight to the last man. And we were determined to do so. And no amount of bombing, no amount of U.S. pressure would ever have stopped us."

Lesson #8: Be prepared to re-examine your reasoning.

What makes us omniscient? Have we a record of omniscience? We are the strongest nation in the world today. I do not believe that we should ever apply that economic, political, and military power unilaterally. If we had followed that rule in Vietnam, we wouldn't have been there. None of our allies supported us. Not Japan, not Germany, not Britain or France. If we can't persuade nations with comparable values of the merit of our cause, we'd better reexamine our reasoning.

[Harry Reasoner] Americans suffered their heaviest casualties of the war in Vietnam last week ? 543 killed in action. Another 1,247 were wounded and hospitalized. The deaths raised the U.S. total in the war so far to 18,239. South Vietnamese put their losses for the week at 522 killed. Communist losses were not reported.
Contributing to those record casualties has been the steady Communist bombardment of the Marine outpost at Khe Sanh. There the North Vietnamese have been tightening their ring around the 2 square mile division.

[EM] To what extent did you feel that you were the author of stuff, or that you were an instrument of things outside of your control?

[RSM] Well, I don't think I felt either. I just felt that I was serving at the request of the President, who had been elected by the American people. And it was my responsibility to try to help him to carry out the office as he believed was in the interest of our people.

What is morally appropriate in a wartime environment? Let me give you an illustration. While I was Secretary, we used what's called "Agent Orange" in Vietnam. A chemical that strips leaves off of trees. After the war, it is claimed that that was a toxic chemical and it killed many individuals — soldiers and civilians — exposed to it.

Were those who issued the approval to use Agent Orange: criminals? Were they committing a crime against humanity? Let's look at the law. Now what kind of law do we have that says these chemicals are acceptable for use in war and these chemicals are not. We don't have clear definitions of that kind. I never in the world would have authorized an illegal action. I'm not really sure I authorized Agent Orange ? I don't remember it ? but it certainly occurred, the use of it occurred while I was Secretary.

**Lesson #9: In order to do good, you may have to engage in evil.**

Norman Morrison was a Quaker. He was opposed to war, the violence of war, the killing. He came to the Pentagon, doused himself with gasoline. Burned himself to death below my office.

He held a child in his arms, his daughter. Passers-by shouted, "Save the child!" He threw the child out of his arms, and the child lived and is alive today. His wife issued a very moving statement: "Human beings must stop killing other human beings." And that's a belief that I shared. I shared it then and I believe it even more strongly today.

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.

I remember reading that General Sherman in the Civil War ? the mayor of Atlanta pleaded with him to save the city. And Sherman essentially said to the mayor just before he torched it and burned it down: "War is cruel. War is cruelty." That was the way LeMay felt. He was trying to save the country. He was trying to save our nation. And in the process, he was prepared to do whatever killing was necessary. It's a very, very difficult position for sensitive human beings to be in. Morrison was one of those. I think I was.

50,000 people came to Washington to demonstrate against the war. About 20,000 of them marched on the Pentagon. The Pentagon is a very, very difficult building to defend. We placed troops carrying rifles around it — U.S. Marshals in front of the soldiers.
But I told the President, "Not a rifle would be loaded without my personal permission." And I wasn't going to grant it.

[EM] What effect did all of this dissent have on your thinking? I mean, Norman Morrison is '65, this is '67.

[RSM] Well, it was a very tense period. A very tense period for my family, which I don't want to discuss.

[EM] How was your thinking changing during this period?

[RSM] I don't think my thinking was changing. We were in the Cold War. And this was a Cold war activity.

**Lesson #10: Never say never.**

[Reporter] Some commentators here have said that the war is turning into a kind of stalemate.

[RSM] No, no. I think on the contrary. As General Westmoreland has pointed out in recent weeks in Saigon, the military operations— the large-unit, military operations— have continued to show very substantial progress.

One of the lessons I learned early on: never say never. Never, never, never. Never say never. And secondly, 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.

[EM] When you talk about the responsibility for something like the Vietnam War, whose responsibility is it?

[RSM] It's the president's responsibility. I don't want to fail to recognize the tremendous contribution I think Johnson made to the country. I don't want to put the responsibility for Vietnam on his shoulders alone, but I do — I am inclined to believe that if Kennedy had lived, he would have made a difference. I don't think we would have had 500,000 men there.

Two very telling photographs. One of them has Johnson like this. You can just see him thinking: "My God, I'm in a hell of a mess. And this guy is trying to tell me to do something that I know is wrong and I'm not gonna do, but how the hell am I gonna get out of this?"

The other photograph, you can just see me saying: "Jesus Christ, I love this man, I respect him, but he's totally wrong. What am I gonna do?"

Johnson couldn't persuade me, and I couldn't persuade him. I had this enormous respect and affection, loyalty, to both Kennedy and Johnson. But at the end, Johnson and I found ourselves poles apart.
And I said to a very close and dear friend of mine, Kay Graham, the former publisher of the Washington Post: "Even to this day, Kay, I don't know whether I quit or was fired?" She said, "You're out of your mind. Of course you were fired."

November 1, 1967. I presented a memo to Johnson that said, "The course we're on is totally wrong. We've got to change it. Cut back at what we're doing in Vietnam. We've got to reduce the casualties, and so on."

It was an extraordinarily controversial memo, and I took it to him, I delivered it myself. "Mr. President, nobody has seen this. Not Dean Rusk, not the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs? nobody. I know that it may contain recommendations and statements that you do not agree with and do not support." I never heard from him.

Something had to give. There was a rumor that I was facing a mental breakdown? I was under such pressure and stress. I don't think that was the case at all. But it was a really traumatic departure.

That's the way it ended. Except for one thing: he awarded me the Medal of Freedom in a very beautiful ceremony at the White House. And he was very, very warm in his comments. And I became so emotional, I could not respond.

Mr. President, I cannot find words to express what lies in my heart today. And I think I better respond on another occasion.

And had I responded, I would have said: "I know what many of you are thinking. You're thinking this man is duplicitous. You're thinking that he has held things close to his chest. You're thinking that he did not respond fully to the desires and wishes of the American people. And I want to tell you: "You're wrong." Of course he had personal idiosyncrasies, no question about it. He didn't accept all the advice he was given.

On several occasions, his associates advised him to be more forthcoming. He wasn't. People did not understand at that time there were recommendations and pressures that would carry the risk of war with China and carry the risk of nuclear war. And he was determined to prevent it. I'm arguing that he had a reason in his mind for doing what he did."

And, of course, shortly after I left, Johnson concluded that he couldn't continue.

[EM] And at this point, how many Americans had been killed in Vietnam?

[RSM] About 25,000. Less than half of the number ultimately killed: 58,000.

Historians don't really like to deal with counterfactuals, with what might have been. They want to talk about history. "And how the hell do you know, McNamara, what might have been? Who knows?" Well, I know certain things.
What I’m doing is thinking through with hindsight, but you don't have hindsight available at the time. I'm very proud of my accomplishments, and I'm very sorry that in the process of accomplishing things, I've made errors.

**Lesson #11: You can’t change human nature.**

We all make mistakes. We know we make mistakes. I don't know any military commander, who is honest, who would say he has not made a mistake. There's a wonderful phrase: "the fog of war."

What "the fog of war" means is: war is so complex it's beyond the ability of the human mind to comprehend all the variables. Our judgment, our understanding, are not adequate. And we kill people unnecessarily.

Wilson said: "We won the war to end all wars." 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.

There's a quote from T.S. Eliot that I just love:

We shall not cease from exploring  
And at the end of our exploration  
We will return to where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

Now that's in a sense where I'm beginning to be.

**Epilogue**

[EM] After you left the Johnson administration, why didn't you speak out against the Vietnam War?

[RSM] I'm not going to say any more than I have. These are the kinds of questions that get me in trouble. You don't know what I know about how inflammatory my words can appear. A lot of people misunderstand the war, misunderstand me. A lot of people think I'm a son of a bitch.

[EM] Do you feel in any way responsible for the War? Do you feel guilty?

[McNamara] I don't want to go any further with this discussion. It just opens up more controversy. I don't want to add anything to Vietnam. It is so complex that anything I say will require additions and qualifications.

[EM] Is it the feeling that you're damned if you do, and if you don't, no matter what?

[RSM] Yeah, that's right. And I'd rather be damned if I don't.