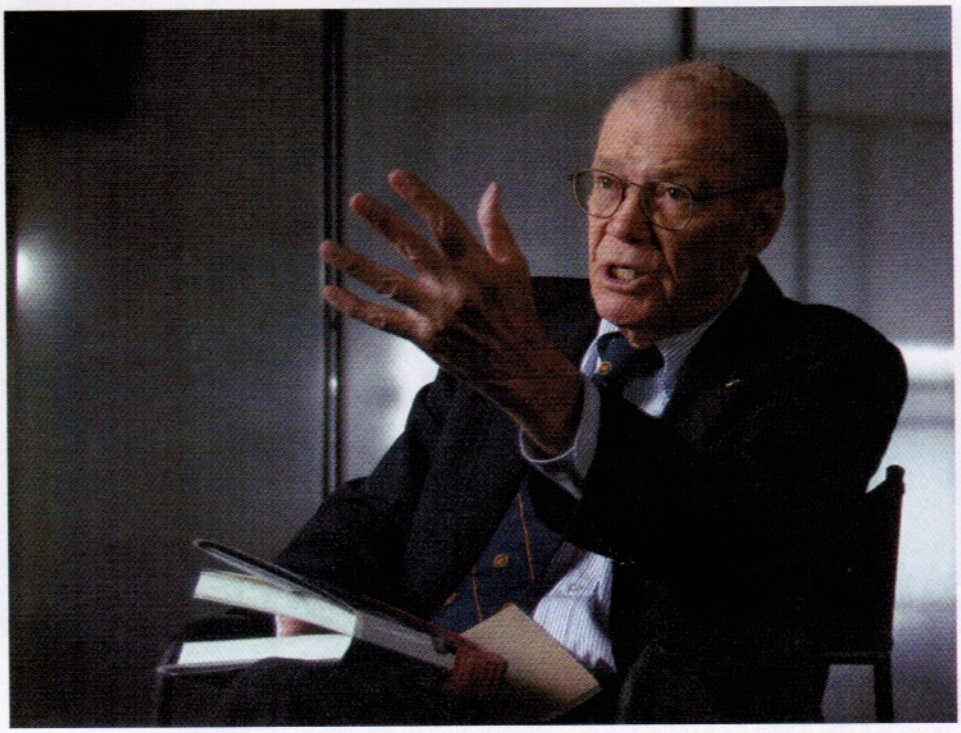


Former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, the first secretary of defense to assert civilian control over the military, sat down for a series of interviews with filmmaker Errol Morris (pictured with McNamara below), and the result is *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons From the Life of Robert S. McNamara.*

A Troubled Legacy

by Bob Davis

Four years ago, when former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara unexpectedly agreed to an hour-long interview for the PBS series *First Person*, documentary filmmaker Errol Morris placed an urgent call to cinematographer Bob Chappell, a longtime friend. "I called Bob at 10 p.m., and McNamara was coming the next day," recalls Morris. Chappell had just returned to the United States after a lengthy stint in Asia; he had lived in Southeast Asia for more than a decade and had recently undergone surgery in Singapore for a broken foot, an injury he had sustained while working in India. "I told Errol I was on crutches and couldn't drive to Boston," says Chappell. "So he said he'd send a car to pick me up!"

By hobbling around the set, Chappell managed to light and shoot the interview, and throughout the job, McNamara never spoke to him. "I got the impression he thought I might've lost a limb in Vietnam and was there to give him a piece of my mind," muses the cameraman. "He didn't want to talk about Vietnam, and whenever Errol steered the discussion in that direction, McNamara's whole manner changed. He became quite defensive [and] stammered a bit. Sometimes he stood up and took off the microphone."

Nevertheless, the interview lasted nearly eight hours. What's more, McNamara stayed a second day for another eight-hour session, and months later, he returned for two more days. Morris found himself with more than enough material for a feature-length documentary.

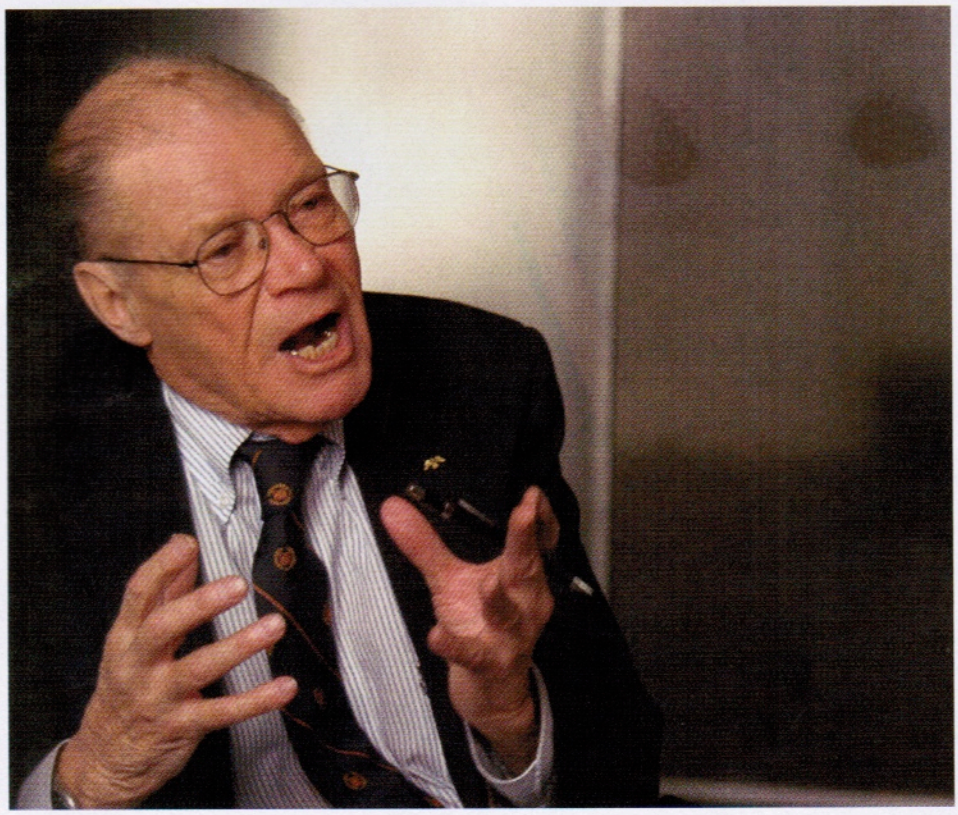
The resultant film, *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons From the Life of Robert S. McNamara*, combines unusual studio interviews, odd archival footage and highly stylized illustrative materials shot specifically for the film. Throughout the interviews, the 85-year-old McNamara — the first secretary of defense to assert civilian control over the military (under Kennedy and Johnson) — challenges, cackles and weeps, and both incriminates and absolves himself for his actions.

Working on a 30'-square stage, Chappell shot the interview on 24p high-definition video, using a Panavised Sony HDW-F900 CineAlta. He didn't use filtration and maintained the equivalent of a T2.5 shooting stop. "We were shoved in one corner, looking back across the stage into the cyclorama 20 feet behind McNamara," he details. Between the cyc and McNamara stood four translucent screens, "slightly more transparent than a light tracing paper, something like Lee Opal diffusion." The set was designed to separate subject from background and combat HD's extensive depth of field. "We were trying to build something neutral behind him and keep it out of focus," says Chappell.

Morris "faced" McNamara through one of two cross-connect teleprompters set at a 45-degree angle in front of the camera. This rig, which Morris calls the "Interrotron," preserves on tape any eye contact the subject makes with the projected interviewer. In reality, says Chappell, "Errol was sitting about 10 feet away, behind a black curtain — like the Wizard of Oz." With Morris was his research staff, which consisted of several Harvard graduate students.

Chappell placed the camera on a new O'Connor Ultimate 50-200 digital fluid head that was designed for exceptionally heavy cameras. The Dutch head's 180-degree tilt range allows for dramatic angles, a characteristic of Morris' recent work. "Errol works with a broad brush," notes Chappell. "He's kind of like the Jackson Pollock of documentary cinema." But for Chappell, the gravity of McNamara's "lessons" — drawn from his participation in World War II, the Cuban missile crisis, and the Vietnam War, among other events — militated against borrowing *First Person*'s rather

Photos by Claire Folger, courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics. Photos of Peter Donahue and Bob Chappell courtesy of the cinematographers.



Whenever the subject turned to Vietnam, McNamara became "quite defensive ... sometimes he stood up and took off the microphone," recalls cinematographer Bob Chappell.

vivid house style. "McNamara is a major figure of the 20th century, and we couldn't treat him lightly."

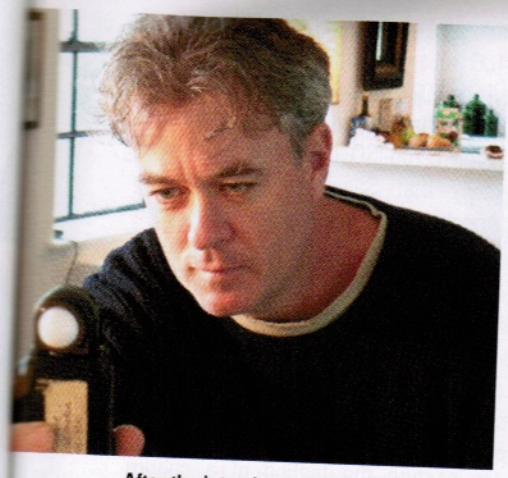
The cinematographer therefore decided to retain some canted and asymmetrical framings but reduce movement to a slow creep. Morris was pleased: "One move Bob did extraordinarily well occurs when McNamara is talking about being a war criminal with respect to the fire-bombing of Tokyo." When McNamara stops talking, he stares directly into the lens, as though daring Morris to respond. But the camera continues its snail-paced zoom and slight Dutch, and "that pause becomes very powerful," says the director.

Though Chappell never knew which topic might come next during the wide-ranging interviews, he tried to frame his subject expressively. On camera left, he shined a diffused 4K HMI through a Chimera box. On the right, he positioned only a white bounce card. "We had a pretty strong ratio on his face, which was intended to create dark shadows under his eyes," he notes. He applied "lots of blacks" in front of the lights that illuminated the background panels, a tactic that created darkness and depth behind McNamara. "When we put black behind, say, the second panel, we'd get a blurry, black blob that seemed to work for the composition, particularly when the discussion turned to death and war."

The Fog of War exemplifies McNamara's lessons through a combination of archival footage and original footage created after the interviews. The latter was shot on 35mm mainly by Peter Donahue, who had worked with Morris on *Mr. Death* and several commercials. The archival footage consisted of several film and video formats and was culled from the Kennedy and Johnson presidential libraries and a number of other sources; it was all transferred to HD D-5, color-corrected (at Globe Department Store in Boston) and then recorded back to film. The result is a veritable history of film and video textures. "We tried to preserve the character of the changing photography," asserts Morris. There's high-contrast black-and-white film footage of Chinese laborers smoothing, by hand, a runway that the Allied forces will never use. There's also the slightly fogged, overexposed black-and-white footage of B-29s dropping their payloads on a flaming Yokohama. Donahue singles out a shot of paratroopers falling out of a plane: "It has a sepia-smoky mood. A news reporter shot it with some old Ektachrome reversal stock, and it's brilliantly beautiful." And Morris chuckles at the "full, crazy color" of a 1960 promotional piece from the Ford Motor Company archives: a massive telescope spots three animated shooting stars that "land" new Fords near shocked socialites who are partying outside an observatory.

The Fog of War begins with perhaps its most ironic images: a Department of Defense reenactment, shot on 35mm, of two 1964 North Vietnamese torpedo attacks on the *USS Maddox,* episodes that led to the infamous Gulf of Tonkin resolution. At least one of those attacks was later proven to be a phantom radar blip caused by freak weather conditions. "Why did they reenact those incidents, one of which didn't occur, within 10 days of their supposed occurrence?" wonders Morris. "One could cynically say the government was trying to perpetrate some kind of fraud, to convince people something had happened that hadn't happened. But I look at it differently. I think they reenacted it to try to understand what had happened because they themselves were deeply puzzled about the events."

Much of the footage Donahue captured poetically illustrates details of McNamara's speeches. When the former president of Ford says "Cadillac," we see a shiny new Cadillac, its rear fin shimmering, its bright red taillight popping in front of Donahue's black-and-white sky drop. When McNamara says "punch cards," Donahue actually gets his lens *inside* an IBM sorting machine as thousands of cards stream by. Donahue's camera, CineMagic's Revolution, employs a multi-hinge snorkel system, two right-angle bends and knuckle joints, a combination that allowed the cinematographer to get his lens into very unusual places. But the amount of glass in the mirror system between the Revolution's lens and its focal plane



After the interviews, cinematographer Peter Donahue created unique 35mm original footage that poetically illustrates details of McNamara's speeches.

meant that Donahue had to pour a lot of light onto the sorting machine, even with Kodak Vision 800T 5289 stock running through the camera. "From the top, I aimed Pars on narrow spot onto a concentrated area. Because the surface of the IBM was so reflective, a lot of it bloomed. The flare worked well." The 800-ISO stock handled the broad contrast range nicely. "A good combination of stock and lens wrested an unusual image out of a pretty benign-looking machine."

For slow tracks over aerial surveillance photos shot during the Cuban missile crisis, Donahue set the Revolution's lens onto a rectangular magnifying glass whose strength was enhanced by an additional round magnifier. This setup, too, required a lot of light. "We built a white Plexi lightbox, the kind you'd normally lamp with Kino Flos," says Donahue. But because the Revolution seems to be crispest at T8.5, he had to "blast the Plexi with Pars.

"One great thing about the Revolution," he continues, "is that you can create a flowing Dutch with its Micro-Force unit." The system's Horizon Tracker and Dual Swivel modules allow infinite shooting angles and, when engaged while rolling, unusual movement. "In shots of the tape recorder and a few other instances, you see movement we couldn't have achieved if we'd put a normal lens on a huge camera body."

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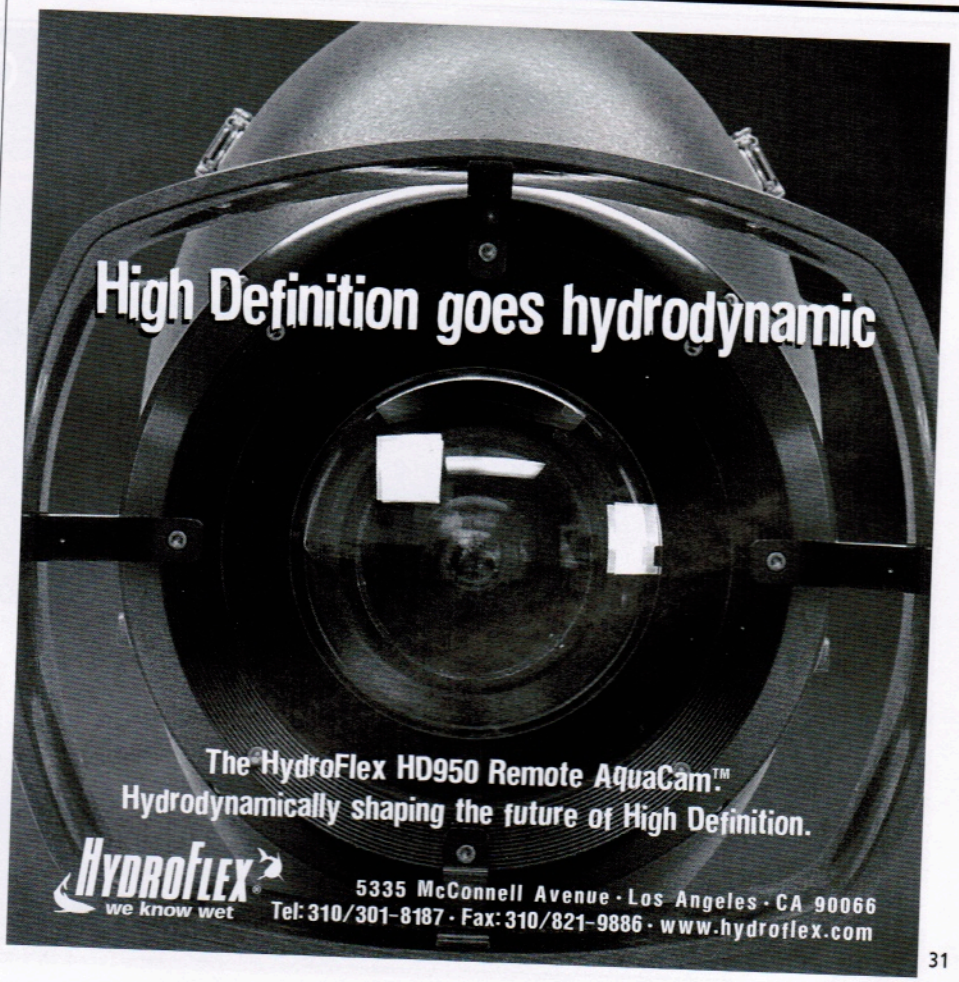
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