



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.

