McNamara Still Lost in 'Fog of War'

Pacific News Service, Commentary, Andrew Lam.

***Editor's Note**: Vietnam War architect Robert S. McNamara, in a new documentary by Errol Morris, confesses that the war was wrong -- or does he? The writer, who was a child in Vietnam during the war, searches for contrition in the words of the former secretary of defense, and finds little.*

Living in Vietnam during the war as a child, I witnessed enough of American military power to know that no ideology or rationale can justify killing more than a million innocent civilians. So it is gratifying to hear Robert McNamara, ex-secretary of defense under Kennedy and Johnson administrations and one of the principle architects of that war, finally confess on-screen that he, too, thought it was a mistake for Americans to go into Vietnam.

Yet as I watched "The Fog of War," the documentary by Errol Morris about McNamara, I felt disappointed. McNamara is a highly intelligent man living a kind of self-deception. While readily confessing that the war was wrong, and that he knew it was wrong all along, he somehow absolved himself just as quickly. Arrogantly, the ex-secretary of defense suggests on camera that he did the best he could under the circumstances and that, if he hadn't been at the helm micromanaging the war's first half, things might have been far worse. Never mind that under his watch the war widened and escalated.

I had hoped for an honest, gut-wrenching mea culpa. What I got instead was an elaborate explanation that sounded like an excuse. Not once did McNamara say, "I'm sorry." His well-argued confessions seemed rehearsed and disconnected from the emotional honesty one associates with remorse. It is as if the head acknowledged that mistakes were made, but the heart refused to feel the horrors that were unleashed.

Near the end of the film, McNamara talks about what he calls the fog of war. "What the fog of war means," he says, "is that 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."

Errol Morris, known for his films "The Thin Blue Line," about an unjust murder conviction, and "A Brief History of Time," about physicist Stephen Hawking, uses that statement to give the movie its title. In a recent interview, Morris says, "I look at the McNamara story as 'the fog of war ate my homework' excuse." He adds: "After all, if war is so complex, then no one is responsible."

While the Vietnamese, both north and south, are not free from blame for killing each other in Vietnam's bloody civil war, McNamara and his bosses, presidents Kennedy and Johnson, are clearly responsible for escalating it. The U.S. government, after all, under McNamara and President Kennedy, helped engineer the coup that killed South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem, when Diem was considering peace negotiations with the North without U.S. interference. His death destabilized South Vietnam and plunged it into another dozen years of bloodshed.

McNamara kept sending American troops to Vietnam while knowing deep in his heart that the war was not winnable, and encouraged the South to continue fighting. It is no wonder that South Vietnamese tell the story of their relationship with America as one of spectacular betrayal. The United States abandoned the South Vietnamese government in the middle of a war. Many South Vietnamese officials died in communist gulags after the war's end, and more than 2 million Vietnamese fled overseas as boat people, many ending up at the bottom of the sea. McNamara never made references to the suffering of the South Vietnamese people as a direct cause of his administration of the war, as if

somehow an entire people have conveniently ceased to exist.

If those who survived the Vietnam War are waiting for an apology from McNamara or the U.S. government, they should not hold their breaths.

McNamara left the Johnson administration in 1967. Despite what he knew about the war, he refused to speak out against it, and watched in silence as more body bags came home. Foggy or not, someone as smart as McNamara should know right from wrong. If the secretary of defense knew it was wrong to continue the war, why did he keep his silence until now, more than three decades later?

Morris asks him precisely that. "Why," he inquires near the end of the film, "did you fail to speak out against the war after you left the Johnson administration?"

"I'm not going to say any more than I have," McNamara responds. "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."

The documentary has a subtitle: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara. One of them is, "Believing and seeing are both often wrong." What that means to McNamara is that doing the right thing turned out to be an enormous error. To me, it means I can't trust the man's confessions. It seems the fog hasn't lifted at all for McNamara -- it has only thickened with the years.

Andrew Lam (lam@pacificnews.org) is a journalist and short story writer, and an editor at PNS.

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