

The Fog of War — A timeless resource for classroom teaching

Errol Morris's new Academy Award winning feature documentary, *The Fog of War*, offers the nation's schools an engaging, timeless, and well-researched teaching tool. This critically acclaimed movie examines issues of war and peace in the 20th century through the lens of one of the century's pivotal figures. Robert S. McNamara offers his account of the century just past, as he remembers participating in it, as well as his reflections on its meaning for the 21st century. Some of what McNamara says in the film is highly controversial—the thoughts of one man reflecting on his own history and the history of his era. That other accounts, other reflections, may differ markedly from McNamara's makes the film all the more provocative for students.

The Fog of War takes the form of a one-on-one conversation between filmmaker Errol Morris (who is behind the camera) and former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara (who is on-camera). The conversation traces McNamara's vast and varied experience: from the end of World War I, through the course of World War II, and the unfolding of the Cold War in Cuba, Vietnam, and around the world. Extensive archival footage of events throughout the 20th century and recently declassified tape recordings of presidential conversations help the viewer to place McNamara, now eighty-five years old, in the chapters of history he discusses.

Much of the content emerging in *The Fog of War* draws on research conducted over the past fifteen years by the Watson Institute's Critical Oral History Project, research in which Robert McNamara has participated. "Critical oral history" was developed to build a bridge between decision-makers caught in the moment and after-the-fact study of that decision-making. It does so by combining, in structured conferences, (1) decision-makers, (2) scholars, and (3) declassified documents. This approach can sometimes reveal information and perspectives so startling that the participants can scarcely comprehend what they are being told. Such a moment occurred at a January 1992 conference in Havana on the Cuban missile crisis. General Anatoly Gribkov revealed that the Soviets had deployed short-range tactical nuclear warheads in Cuba, and that if the expected U.S. attack and invasion had come, the Soviet commander would probably have used them. Cuban President Fidel Castro added that he had urged the Soviets to do just that. Upon hearing this, several U.S. participants, led by Robert McNamara, literally went pale and temporarily speechless. The Americans knew that the attack may have been just hours away, but they did not know that ships carrying the invading forces would likely have been destroyed and any U.S. marines making it to the beaches would have been incinerated. It was a rare moment: decision-makers on all three sides were literally thrown into a time machine and the others present could watch and palpably feel, as if watching an instant replay thirty years later, some of the horror, revulsion and despair the leaders felt at the time, as the clock seemed to tick down toward nuclear holocaust. *The Fog of War* captures the feel of this and other similar moments as Robert McNamara talks to us about this experience and others like it and the lessons that he believes should be drawn from them.

Errol Morris has said of *The Fog of War* is in essence a conversation between two Bob McNamara's—a forty-something decision-maker and an eighty-something scholar—about

the meaning of his experience with violent conflict in the 20th century, the bloodiest century in human history. The film further challenges us to look closely at that tragic century for clues as to how we might avoid a repetition of it in the 21st century.

A Teacher's Guide, prepared by the Choices for the 21st Century Education Program and the Critical Oral History Project—both at Brown University— helps students to connect the film and its message to 20th century history and to consider McNamara's role as a political and military figure. The guide offers eight distinct lesson plans. Accompanying online resources, including primary sources, audio transcripts, and interviews with scholars, are also available. In a final activity, students have the opportunity to define their own hopes for the future and then to add their voices to those of peers nationwide using an online ballot.

The Teacher's Guide for *The Fog of War* is available free of charge from the Choices Program web site at <www.choices.edu/fogofwar>. A DVD will be released on May 11 and is available from <www.Amazon.com>.

This article was drawn from material published in the Teacher's Guide for *The Fog of War*, developed by the Choices Program and the Critical Oral History Project, Brown University. It was published in *The Leader*, National Social Studies Supervisors Association, Spring 2004.