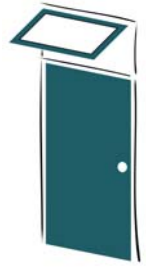


the transom review

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Edited by Sydney Lewis

Morris on McNamara

Interview by Nubar Alexanian



Photos by Nubar Alexanian

(Editor's Note: Last year on Transom, when Errol Morris was interviewed about interviewing, he spoke first about interviewing Robert McNamara. At the time, he asked us not to use that part because he was still in the midst and concerned about upsetting the dynamic by talking about it. As his remarkable new documentary film, Fog of War, is about to open, we asked if we could publish his comments about that dynamic now. You'll find them interesting.)

Nubar:

Tell me about your McNamara film.

Errol:

Well, I promised myself after the Leuchter film, that I would not make another feature-length documentary. That shows you how good my promises are. Not good at all. I had been working on a documentary series for IFC (the Independent Film Channel) and was set up for interviews. For years and years, I had talked about interviewing Robert McNamara. I kept putting it off, putting it off. Part of it is -- I couldn't think of any reason why he would want to talk to me.

The Quintessential American

Nubar:

But why him?

Errol:

Why him? Because of his involvement in the war in Vietnam and because of the three books that he has written since the mid-nineties -- *In Retrospect*, *Argument Without End* and *Wilson's Ghost*. McNamara is the quintessential American figure. A man who Zelig-like found himself at amazing moments, century-defining moments, in the history of the twentieth century. From Berlin on the day of the Nazi invasion of Poland, Shanghai on the day of the Japanese invasion -- part of their war to conquer China -- the firebombing of Tokyo in 1945, to his leadership role in the postwar economic recovery, his ascendancy to the presidency of the Ford Motor Company in 1960, his role in the Defense Department -- seven years as Secretary of Defense for Kennedy, Johnson, and then his role as President of the World Bank. It's an amazing story. But it's not just a story of these events; it's a story of one man's attempt to understand these events and his role in them.

A Real Hero

I demonstrated against McNamara years and years ago. Although it's not altogether clear to me that it was him. I was at the University of Wisconsin and I graduated in June, 1969, and McNamara was already out of the Defense Department by early 1968. So I probably wasn't demonstrating against him, I was demonstrating against Clark Clifford and then, later, various officials in the Nixon administration. But I was certainly aware of him. I remember at the time that I was at the University of Wisconsin, reading several essays by I. F. Stone that had appeared in the New York Review of Books. And these essays were about the Gulf of Tonkin Bay incidents and the Congressional Resolution which followed: the incidents on August 2nd and 4th of August, 1964, and the resolution that immediately followed that essentially authorized the expansion of the war in Vietnam. There were these allegations, allegations that these incidents were trumped up, they were manufactured in order to insure acceptance of this resolution and acceptance of the escalation of the war. It's a serious charge -- that the Johnson administration manufactured an international incident in order to wage war in Southeast Asia. I really admire I. F. Stone. He is for me an American hero, a real American hero.

Nubar:

Why's that?

Errol:

Fearless, really, really smart, willing to investigate and re-investigate, willing to take on everyone and not be beholden to anybody.

Nubar:

Is there anyone like that today?



Errol:

I don't know. He was unique, not only in that time but even now. You know, you think of Christopher Hitchen's book on Kissinger, which is a very interesting but also a very nasty book. I. F. Stone at his best was never hysterical; he was always very precise, very, very clear. Always reasonable. And passionate. As if one of the framers -- a Jefferson or Adams -- had come back to life two hundred years later and was as committed as ever to the preservation of the Republic. I had the idea -- this is what Americans should be like.

Nubar:

I mean, was he influential to, to your work?

Errol:

Yes, although I never thought of it before.

The Halberstam Thesis

There's this commonly held view about McNamara's story which tells us how you're supposed to look at him; what his life is about, who he is. I call it the Halberstam thesis, because Halberstam elaborated it in his famous book, *The Best and the Brightest*. The book with the oh-so ironic title, *The Best and the Brightest*, the book about the Kennedy-Johnson whiz kids who dragged us into a loathsome, disastrous war in Southeast Asia. Halberstam created a portrait of McNamara as a number cruncher, a statistician -- a person devoid of ethical dimension or even human dimension -- who came much too late to the conclusion that the Vietnam War was a mistake. Halberstam's version of the story is that the Vietnam War was a bad war conceived of by bad people. It is perhaps inarguable that the Vietnam War was wrong. But was it conceived by evil or shallow people? The Halberstam book just made me more curious about McNamara. You asked me, why did I get interested in him? I wanted to talk to him. I wanted find out about him. Who was he? When something bad happens -- and the war in Vietnam was something very, very bad -- we want to know why. Why? How did it happen? How could it have happened?

Nubar:

OK.

Delay's End

Errol:

He wrote these three books -- *In Retrospect* in 1995 which was supposedly his mea culpa for Vietnam. I don't believe it was a mea culpa, but that's another issue. But he published *In Retrospect* in 1995, and I read the book and it really interested me. It's an amazing and important book. And then he published another book in 1998, *Argument Without End*, which is about his trip back to Vietnam, to Hanoi, almost thirty years after he left the

Johnson administration, where he met with various civilian and military leaders of North Vietnam during the Vietnam War. He met with them in order to discuss their respective roles in the conflict and whether the war could have been avoided. So that's a very, very powerful and interesting book as well. And then recently he published a third book called *Wilson's Ghost*. I read *Wilson's Ghost* and decided that I had delayed long enough; I should try to talk to him. And so I called him and much to my surprise he agreed to come up [to Cambridge, Massachusetts].

The Story Of Vietnam

I explained to him that my style of interviewing was extensive; I like to interview people for not a half-hour or an hour, but sometimes for eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve hours. And McNamara said, "Well, that's ridiculous. I'm not going to sit for twelve hours of interviews." We finally got him to agree to come up and be interviewed over a two-day period of time, that he'd give me two hours on each day. And then he called me several days before he was to come up and said, "I agreed to do this, but I've thought it over. This makes no sense. I really shouldn't be doing this. There's really no good reason for me to be talking to you. And so I really can't do this. I don't want to do this. I shouldn't be doing this. But I said I would do it, and so therefore, I will do it. I was telling this story to my friend, Ron Rosenbaum [the writer and newspaper columnist] and he said, "Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, I know. That's the story of Vietnam." So he came up and we did about two-and-a-half hours of interviews the first day and then we did about two-and-a-half hours of interviews the second day. And they were amazing, they were just amazing interviews. And it was really clear that this was a movie, that it was not just a half-hour for television, that it was something that should be put in theaters and finished as a movie.

Falling Skulls

Nubar:

The visuals in your movies are so spectacular.

Errol:

One of my favorite scenes in the "The Fog of War" is the falling skulls.

Nubar:

Falling skulls?

Errol:

Yeah. Skulls dropped six flights down a stairwell. McNamara told me a story about how he hired Cornell Aeronautical Laboratories to conduct a study on car crash injuries. They actually wrapped human skulls in various kinds of protective gear and dropped them down

the stairwells in various Cornell dormitories. The falling skulls were the first crash-test dummies.

Nubar:
OK.

Errol:
The story starts from the interview then gets elaborated.

Investigating Mystery

Errol:
I think that with Robert McNamara, there is a mystery, and whether I can answer this mystery or not is unclear to me. In fact, I doubt that I can. But I'd like to try. Go back to the Gulf of Tonkin Bay incident. Now, that story interests me because it's very much like the story of The Thin Blue Line. How did we imagine things that never happened? That was the center of the Gulf of Tonkin question. Did people somehow convince themselves that this was an act of communist aggression? Did they somehow imagine incidents that didn't occur? Not deliberately, but just because they were in the appropriate state of mind where they could easily imagine and believe that kind of thing.



Nubar:
How do you get at that? How can you even resolve those kinds of questions?

Errol:
Well, you can start by asking them. We're now privy to these amazing conversations that occurred between Johnson and his advisors. We can actually hear audio recordings of Johnson from the Oval Office talking to McNamara, to Dean Rusk, to Bundy, and so on and so forth. It's amazing. Some of these conversations with McNamara are in the movie. And they shine light on this whole issue of what was going on the week that we deliberated on these incidents [August 1st - August 6th, 1964], and then bombed North Vietnam.

The Essential Tragedy

Nubar:
You seem obsessed with mistakes, confusion. With error....

Errol:

It's the way of the world.

Nubar:

You're even skeptical of the truth-value of photography.

Errol:

Sure. Photoshop taught us something that should have been obvious from the very beginning of photography -- that photography is a lie. People are really fascinated by the causal connection between the world and a photograph of it. Yet we're also aware that there's slack in the system.

Nubar:

Right, with still photographs it's a moment out of context and so there's no way for a photograph to be true or false. But in your medium, there's a relationship from one moment to the next.

Errol:

Yeah. So with film it's several moments out of context rather than just one. Film doesn't give us some privileged access to the truth. Occasionally we get glimpses off what might be true. But my films are about being lost in a subjective world, and trying to see where the edges of that world might be. I look at McNamara very, very differently than Halberstam. He's a person that for me has clearly done things that are very bad. The war in Vietnam was unspeakably horrible, and a crime from my perspective. And yet there is something immensely likable about McNamara. And something truly moral. This is not a story about an unethical man. I do not believe that what he did came out of pettiness, self-interest or malice, but came out of a desire to do good. And therein lies the essential tragedy of the story.

About Transom

What We're Trying To Do

Here's the short form: Transom.org is an experiment in channeling new work and voices to public radio through the Internet, and for discussing that work, and encouraging more. We've designed Transom.org as a performance space, an open editorial session, an audition stage, a library, and a hangout. Our purpose is to create a worthy Internet site and make public radio better.



Submissions can be stories, essays, home recordings, sound portraits, interviews, found sound, non-fiction pieces, audio art, whatever, as long as it's good listening. Material may be submitted by anyone, anywhere - by citizens with stories to tell, by radio producers trying new styles, by writers and artists wanting to experiment with radio.

We contract with Special Guests to come write about work here. We like this idea, because it 1) keeps the perspective changing so we're not stuck in one way of hearing, 2) lets us in on the thoughts of creative minds, and 3) fosters a critical and editorial dialog about radio work, a rare thing.

Our Discussion Boards give us a place to talk it all over. Occasionally, we award a Transom.org t-shirt to especially helpful users, and/or invite them to become Special Guests.

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ATLANTIC PUBLIC MEDIA

Atlantic Public Media administers Transom.org. APM is a non-profit organization based in Woods Hole, Massachusetts which has as its mission "to serve public broadcasting through training and mentorship, and through support for creative and experimental approaches to program production and distribution." APM is also the founding group for *WCAI & WNAN*, a new public radio service for Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket under the management of *WGBH-Boston*.

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