

'Fog of War' vs. 'Stop the Presses'

by **ERROL MORRIS & ERIC ALTERMAN**

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Cambridge, Mass.

Over the years I have read with avidity various intellectual disputes in *The New York Review of Books* and other literary journals. But I have never imagined myself being a part of one of them. However, I found Eric Alterman's December 15 "Stop the Presses" column on my recent film, *The Fog of War*, so devoid of historical scholarship (despite his claim of having worked on his PhD for eleven years) that I feel compelled to respond.

Alterman called me just after finishing the piece, first leaving a message with my office that I needed to be "prepared to answer some difficult questions." I called him. He read me sections of the piece. In particular, the passage, "After the screening of the film...[Morris] argued that the popular view of a 'vacillatory Johnson and advisers like McNamara breathing down his neck' for war was false. Well, Morris is a brilliant filmmaker, but he is not a historian." Of course, I didn't care for his suggestion that the history in the film is flawed. But I am willing to acknowledge my errors and mistakes. I just would like them to be clearly elucidated.

Alterman went on to portray McNamara as the prime mover in the conflict: It is a bellicose McNamara egging on a vacillatory LBJ. This view is widely held and has become one of the central myths about the escalation of the war. McNamara, the numbers cruncher, the statistician, the "IBM machine with legs," goaded LBJ into war, and then cried alligator tears when it was too damn late. (Last year, HBO presented *The Path to War*--Frankenheimer's last film--with Alec Baldwin playing Robert McNamara. Not surprisingly, it promoted this same thesis: LBJ vacillatory; McNamara bellicose.)

The only problem with this account is that it is not compatible with recently released historical documentation--in particular, JFK's recordings of his Cabinet meetings and LBJ's selective recordings of his phone conversations.

One of the recordings that most interests me--and that has been included in *The Fog of War*--is a JFK Cabinet meeting from October 2, 1963, that occurred just after McNamara had returned from an inspection trip to Vietnam. In the meeting, McNamara argues for the removal of 1,000 US advisers from Vietnam by Christmastime and the removal of the remaining 15,000 advisers by 1965. McNamara cites this conversation in his Vietnam opus, *In Retrospect*, but it has only recently been released to the public by the Kennedy library. Here is an exchange between Kennedy and McNamara:

Kennedy: The advantage to taking them out is?

McNamara: We can say to the Congress and people that we do have a plan for reducing the exposure of US combat personnel.

K: My only reservation about it is if the war doesn't continue to go well, it will look like we were overly optimistic.

McN: We need a way to get out of Vietnam, and this is a way of doing it.

Soon after taking office, Lyndon Johnson began covertly recording his telephone conversations. In one of these conversations, from February 25, 1964--approximately three months after Kennedy's assassination--Johnson can be heard chastising McNamara for that recommendation to remove advisers from Vietnam:

Johnson: I always thought it was foolish for you to make any statements about withdrawing. I thought it was bad psychologically. But you and the President thought otherwise, and I just sat silent.

McN: The problem is...

J: Then come the questions: how in the hell does McNamara think, when he's losing a war, he can pull men out of there?

What is important about this conversation is that Johnson is stating unequivocally that he disagreed (although he remained silent) with their decision to withdraw advisers starting in 1963, to culminate in all of them being removed by 1965, after the 1964 presidential election.

In "Exit Strategies" in *The Boston Review*, James Galbraith writes about the October 2 meeting and wonders why it has been so often neglected by historians and journalists. Why indeed? My theory is that it runs counter to what most people want to hear. (But just because it isn't what people want to hear doesn't mean it isn't true.)

My conversation with Alterman was somewhat surreal. I asked him: How do you account for these conversations? Alterman answered, I don't have to. I answered, Yes, you do. If you believe that McNamara pressed a vacillatory Johnson into war, you have to explain what's going on in this period immediately before and after JFK's assassination. These conversations are part of it. Alterman answered, Well, I could pick another set of conversations that prove the exact opposite. I urged him to do so. He said there are dozens of conversations that show Johnson confused, hand-wringing, vacillatory. Finally, he read several from 1965.

I said, Not relevant. The issue is late 1963 and early 1964. Sure, Johnson was given to self-pity, self-doubt, hand-wringing about his decisions to escalate, but as the historian Fredrik Logevall wrote in his 1999 work *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam*: "Johnson's doubts, though considerable...centered on whether the war effort would be successful rather than on whether it should be undertaken." (There is also the important question of whether it suited Johnson to portray himself publicly as being reluctant to escalate, in spite of what his real intentions may have been in the matter.)

The February 25, 1964, conversation between Johnson and McNamara provides evidence that Johnson had no intention of losing the war in Vietnam. It also reveals that Johnson's intention to escalate in Vietnam was formulated before Kennedy's assassination and Diem's assassination, as early as October 2, 1963, and probably before. I urged Alterman to read Galbraith's piece. He told me

he didn't have to. He had read other pieces Galbraith has written.

The story of McNamara as told in *The Fog of War* certainly does not let him off the hook. It is a different story, not a better one. If McNamara was skeptical of increased US involvement in Vietnam, why did he support bombing North Vietnam in March 1965 and the 100,000-man troop increase in July 1965? Why did he publicly support the Vietnam War if he was afflicted with private doubts? Did his loyalty to Johnson, to the presidency, trump his better inclinations? Or did he reassess the dangers to the United States of a unified, Communist Vietnam?

It is not my intention to exonerate McNamara for his involvement in the planning of the Vietnam War. What I do intend is to help correct a common misconception that President Johnson was bullied into a war that he had no intention of fighting. Is this important? Does this matter? Yes, because what we are now faced with is this question: What do you do if you serve a bellicose President who wants to go to war no matter what? What protections are provided for this contingency within our system of government? What recourse does a Cabinet member have if he disagrees with the President's policies? Should he go to Congress? To the public? Or should he stay and try to change policy within the government? These are particularly pertinent questions that unfortunately are not being asked. I'm not at all certain that we can learn from history, but we certainly can't learn from it if it is ignored. Santayana is well-known for saying, Those that are unfamiliar with history are condemned to repeat it. He is less known for a far more interesting quote: History is wrong, and always has to be rewritten. In recent years, the transcripts of Kennedy's executive committee meetings on the Cuban missile crisis have been transcribed, edited and annotated by Ernest May and Philip Zelikow. Likewise, the Johnson telephone conversations (which have been released in some instances in the last few months) provide new information on Johnson, McNamara and the Vietnam War. I believe that *The Fog of War* has used this information to shed new light on complex historical events.

Alterman was kind enough to inform me that he is writing the "definitive" book on the Gulf of Tonkin and the Cuban missile crisis. Interesting of him to decide this in advance of publication. Forgive me if I seem skeptical.

ERROL MORRIS

ALTERMAN REPLIES

New York City

It is with a heavy heart that I respond to the confusions, misunderstandings and mistaken allegations in Errol Morris's letter, as I greatly admire his work as a documentarian and intended my column on *The Fog of War* to reflect that admiration. Clearly, in the mind of Morris, I failed in this regard. So it now falls upon me to correct the angry and misplaced insinuations in his letter, one by one.

(1) Morris writes that I called his office saying that he needed to be "prepared to answer some difficult questions." This is apparently a mistaken transcription by his assistant. I said the questions were "complicated," which is why I did not want to leave a message about their content. All the questions I had for Morris dealt with the interviews he conducted with Robert McNamara

addressing the issue of McNamara's false claim to have had secret "intercepts" proving that a second Gulf of Tonkin attack took place. This is a matter of considerable historical import because while McNamara now admits that there was no second attack, he has never explained what these secret intercepts showed that he insisted for decades proved the opposite. At the screening of *The Fog of War*, Morris informed me that he had questioned McNamara about these intercepts and had much material with regard to them that did not make it into the film. As a historian who is about to publish a book dealing with this matter, I was naturally eager to see them. Alas, during the course of our phone conversation, Morris told me that he did not have any such material. If only...

(2) Morris complains that my view of the Johnson/McNamara relationship "is not compatible with recently released historical documentation." I beg to differ. Morris points to a couple of transcripts of phone conversations he says prove his point. What I told him was that I could point to probably dozens of other conversations and historical documentation that prove the opposite. Since he is not trained as a historian, Morris lacks the ability to weigh the value of one conversation against another, considering context, hidden motives and persons present. No one in American history requires more careful treatment in that regard than those two pathological liars Lyndon Johnson and Robert McNamara. I see from his letter, for instance, that Morris has relied for his research on the edited transcripts of Philip Zelikow and Ernest May. I assume he means Ernest R. May and Philip Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis*. As any historian who kept up with the debates on the topic could have informed him, this is a serious mistake. Sheldon Stern, former chief archivist in the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, notes in his superb new study, *Averting "The Final Failure": John F. Kennedy and the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings*, that these transcripts are "marred by serious errors." A far more accurate rendering of the transcripts of the tapes can be found in *The Presidential Recordings: John F. Kennedy: Volumes 1-3, The Great Crises*, Philip Zelikow, Timothy Naftali and Ernest May, eds. For Stern's original critique, Morris should consult "What JFK Really Said," *Atlantic Monthly* (May 2000); and Sheldon Stern, "The 1997 Published Transcripts of the JFK Cuban Missile Crisis Tapes: Too Good to Be True?" *Presidential Studies Quarterly* (September 2000).

(3) Morris is mistaken, once again, when he says I read him conversations that took place in early 1965. The two I remember quoting to him took place on the same day in May 1964, more than sixty days before the Tonkin Gulf incidents. In one, Johnson tells his Adviser for National Security Affairs, McGeorge Bundy, "I stayed awake last night thinking of this thing.... It looks to me like we're getting into another Korea.... I don't think that we can fight them 10,000 miles away from home.... I don't think it's worth fighting for. And I don't think that we can get out. It's just the biggest damned mess that I ever saw." When Bundy replies that he too thinks it an "awful mess," Johnson volunteers that he'd been observing his valet, Kenneth Gaddis, that day, a man with "six little old kids, and he's getting out my things. And I just thought about ordering his kids in there. And what in the hell am I ordering him out there for? What the hell is Vietnam worth to me?... What is it worth to this country?" Johnson continues, "It's damned easy to get in a war but it's gonna be awfully hard to ever extricate yourself if you get in." In the other, Johnson tells Richard Russell, powerful chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee who was also (unlike McNamara) urging him to avoid the "quicksand" of Vietnam, that he does not "think the people of the country know much about Vietnam and I think they care a hell of a lot less." Had I been more on the ball, I would also have read him the June 1964 conversation in which Johnson notes that he is hearing advice that might justify a withdrawal, and McNamara immediately counters--"pressing very hard" in the judgment of

historian Michael Beschloss--"I just don't believe we *can* be pushed out of there, Mr. President. We just can't *allow* it to be done. You wouldn't want to go down in history as having----" The President interrupts, in accord, "Not at all." There are plenty more of these, alas.

(4) Morris also mischaracterizes my words regarding James Galbraith's *Boston Review* article. I did not say I had read "other articles" by Galbraith. I said I had read what I understood to be another version of the *same* article in *Salon* that he had read in the *Review*, but that I would check to make sure. Indeed, I did.

(5) And Morris mischaracterizes my remarks about my own work. I would never (no decent historian ever should) characterize my book as the "definitive" study of anything. Regarding the Gulf of Tonkin I may have recommended that Morris take a look at Edwin Moise's study *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War*, which I take to be definitive until something better comes along. The historiography of the Cuban missile crisis is so vast and rapidly expanding that I hesitate to recommend a single book, but I do think Morris's understanding of the crisis could be enhanced by consulting the work of Barton Bernstein, Mark White, Raymond Garthoff, Timothy Naftali and Alexandr Fursenko, Philip Zelikow, as well as the aforementioned Stern. I never claimed that my own modest contribution will be "definitive." It will, however, be improved if Morris shares with me the material he promised to send that will allow me to weigh his own historical discoveries against my eleven years of research. I look forward to receiving these materials so that my work might reflect Morris's substantial contribution to the historical record--our differences of interpretation notwithstanding.

ERIC ALTERMAN

About Eric Alterman

Eric Alterman is a Distinguished Professor of English, Brooklyn College, City University of New York, and Professor of Journalism at the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism. He is also "The Liberal Media" columnist for *The Nation* and a fellow of The Nation Institute, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress in Washington, DC, where he writes and edits the "Think Again" column, a senior fellow (since 1985) at the World Policy Institute. Alterman is also a regular columnist for Moment magazine and a regular contributor to The Daily Beast. He is the author of seven books, including the national bestsellers, *What Liberal Media? The Truth About Bias and the News* (2003, 2004), and *The Book on Bush: How George W. (Mis)leads America* (2004). The others include: *When Presidents Lie: A History of Official Deception and its Consequences*, (2004, 2005). *His Sound & Fury: The Making of the Punditocracy* (1992, 2000), won the 1992 George Orwell Award and his *It Ain't No Sin to be Glad You're Alive: The Promise of Bruce Springsteen* (1999, 2001), won the 1999 Stephen Crane Literary Award, and *Who Speaks for America? Why Democracy Matters in Foreign Policy*, (1998). His most recent book is *Why We're Liberals: A Handbook for Restoring America's Most Important Ideals* (2008, 2009).

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