

## Lesson Number One: “Empathize With Your Enemy”

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The authors analyze the role of Ralph K. White’s concept of “empathy” in the context of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Vietnam War, and firebombing in World War II. They focus on the empathy—in hindsight—of former Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, as revealed in the various proceedings of the Critical Oral History Project, as well as *Wilson’s Ghost* and Errol Morris’s *The Fog of War*.

Empathy is the *great* corrective for all forms of war-promoting misperception . . . . It [means] simply understanding the thoughts and feelings of others . . . jumping in imagination into another person’s skin, imagining how you might feel about what you saw.

Ralph K. White, in *Fearful Warriors* (White, 1984, p. 160–161)

That’s what I call empathy. We must try to put ourselves inside their skin and look at us through their eyes, just to understand the thoughts that lie behind their decisions and their actions.

Robert S. McNamara, in *The Fog of War* (Morris, 2003a)

This is the story of the influence of the work of Ralph K. White, psychologist and former government official, on the beliefs of Robert S. McNamara, former secretary of defense. White has written passionately and persuasively about the importance of deploying empathy in the development and conduct of foreign policy. McNamara has, as a policymaker, experienced the success of political decisions made with the benefit of empathy and borne the responsibility for fail-

ures of policies made in ignorance of the mindsets of adversaries. In his retirement, McNamara has worked to learn what he did not know about those adversaries. His retrospective learning began and continued with international conferences that we organized involving McNamara and his colleagues and their former adversaries. McNamara approached these conferences with a powerful curiosity about what had gone wrong. How had the United States, Soviet Union, and Cuba, for example, brought the world so close to nuclear war in October 1962 (Lukas, 1992; Schlesinger, 1992)? Moreover, how had the United States and North Vietnam jointly escalated the war in Southeast Asia in the 1960s to a conflict of catastrophic proportions, claiming the lives of more than 2 million Vietnamese and more than 58,000 Americans (Shipler, 1997)? McNamara's mind was poised, therefore, to consider the utility of empathy in international relations as a way to help him understand what went wrong. At this point, we introduced Robert McNamara to the work of Ralph White.

We had met White in Chicago, in 1986, at a panel on the prevention of nuclear war, sponsored by the American Orthopsychiatric Association (Blight, 1986a). Blight was developing his thoughts about a "policy relevant psychology" (1986a, 1986b, 1987, 1988, 1990)—a psychology in which the first order of business is to understand the assumptions and worldviews of the policymakers. The centrality of empathy in this endeavor was obvious. Drawing on White's insights, we embarked on a mission to practice what he was preaching. This was how our method of critical oral history began: in an attempt, as two people with academic training in psychology, to see, feel, and understand the world as it is seen by policymakers from the United States, Russia, Cuba, and Vietnam. In the course of our research, we hoped to facilitate their mutual learning about each other. This research program led to a working relationship with McNamara that spans nearly 2 decades, and to serving as the principal substantive advisors over the last 3 years to director Errol Morris during the making of *The Fog of War*. The results of our infusion of the work of White into the McNamara and Morris Academy Award-winning film are also evident throughout the book that inspired *The Fog of War—Wilson's Ghost: Reducing the Risk of Conflict, Killing, and Catastrophe in the 21st Century* (McNamara & Blight, 2003).

#### EMPATHY IN THE FOG OF WAR: THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

White, a former U.S. Information Agency official, later a psychologist and political scientist at George Washington University, has been, for decades, the foremost exponent of the deployment of realistic empathy in international affairs (White, 1984, 1986). In December 2003 and into the spring of 2004, White's seminal message made it onto the big screen. In the Academy Award-winning film, *The Fog of War*,

director Morris examined issues of war and peace in the 20th century through the lens of one of the century's pivotal figures, former U.S. Secretary of Defense McNamara (Morris, 2003a). The conversations between Morris (who, in the film, is behind the camera) and McNamara (who is on-camera) invited the audience to vicariously experience moments of destruction and peril, in which McNamara participated, including the firebombing of Tokyo and 66 other Japanese cities during World War II, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the escalation of the Vietnam War. This is, in Morris's words, "history from the inside out rather than from the outside in" (Morris, 2003b).

The subtitle of *The Fog of War* reveals the structure of the film: *Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*, lessons that Morris extrapolated from McNamara's experiences. The film was cut from more than 20 hours of interviews that he conducted with McNamara and enriched by extensive archival footage. Morris skillfully orchestrated "conversations" across time between the 80-something McNamara looking back on his life and the 40-something McNamara living that life (Gross, 2004). "At my age," McNamara said to Morris and the audience, "I'm at an age where I can look back and derive some conclusions about my actions. My rule has been: Try to learn, try to understand what happened. Develop the lessons and pass them on." (Morris, 2003a). The fundamental lesson that McNamara had learned and the one that he most wanted to pass on is White's lesson: "Empathize with your enemy." Morris too gave it preeminence: it is Lesson Number One of *The Fog of War*.

With McNamara on the big screen as White's virtual spokesman, one can now do an internet search for "empathy and international relations" and find that the entries are no longer restricted to scholarly journals and books. *Variety*, the trade paper of the film industry, comes up. Todd McCarthy, the magazine's chief film critic, highlighted the importance of empathy in his review of the film following its world premier at Cannes in May 2003:

McNamara reasons that the U.S. was able to come out on top in [the Cuban Missile Crisis], not because he or JFK or anyone else was such a genius but because Washington was able to "empathize" with its enemy; America understood its adversaries sufficiently to know what it would take to allow them to save face in defeat. Such was not the case in Vietnam, he admits. The big mistake there was the legacy that carried over from the '50s, to think of Vietnam strictly in geopolitical Cold War terms; as a former North Vietnamese leader much later pointed out to him, what the Americans didn't understand was that, for Ho Chi Minh, the war with the U.S. was just the final phase of a war for independence that had been going on for nearly 100 years, one that they knew they had to win. (McCarthy, 2003, p. 6)

Film reviews in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, and on National Public Radio underscored the importance of empathy not only in past crises but also in

current events (Angell, 2004; Ebert, 2004; Gross, 2004; Power, 2003). Roger Ebert (2004), America's best-known film critic, famous for his "thumbs-up" or "thumbs-down" indicators of his opinion of the quality of a film, wondered "how the current planners of the war in Iraq would respond to lessons No. 1 and 2 ('Empathize with your enemy' and 'Rationality will not save us') or for that matter No. 6 ('Get the data'), No. 7 ('Belief and seeing are both often wrong'), and No. 8 ('Be prepared to reexamine your reasoning')."

In *The Fog of War*, the 80-something-year-old McNamara was clearly in teaching-mode, some reviewers have even said preaching-mode. In the words of Roger Angell (2004), "old Robert McNamara—who at times appears to stand in our path with the bony finger and crazy agenda of a street saint ... is still energized by war, gesturing and jabbing his finger at us" (p. 32). Between December 2003 and May 2004, when the DVD was released, nearly 1 million people saw that "bony finger" on the big screen, pointing at them and admonishing them to think more deeply about U.S. foreign policy. The pedagogical utility of McNamara's agenda—also known as Ralph White's agenda—is displayed in the Official Teacher's Guide for *The Fog of War* (developed by the Choices Program and the Critical Oral History Project at Brown University's Watson Institute for International Studies, and distributed by Sony Pictures Classics to 100,000 high school social studies and history teachers in the United States). As with the film, Lesson Number One is "Empathize with Your Enemy" (Graseck, Blight, & Lang, 2003).

So realistic empathy—more or less exactly as White formulated it—had its name "up in lights" and, in *The Fog of War*, McNamara and Morris applied White's ideas to three pivotal events of the past century: the bombing of Japan in World War II, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the escalation of the Vietnam War. To recall what White (1984) said, in chapter and verse

Empathy is the *great* corrective for all forms of war-promoting misperception ... . It [means] simply understanding the thoughts and feelings of others ... . It is distinguished from sympathy, which is defined as feeling with others. Empathy with opponents is therefore psychologically possible even when a conflict is so intense that sympathy is out of the question. We are not talking about warmth or approval and certainly not about agreeing with or siding with but only about realistic empathy. (p. 160)

White (1984) went on to explain the implementation of empathy in the cause of reducing the risk of conflict:

How can empathy be achieved? ... It means jumping in imagination into another person's skin, imagining how you might feel about what you saw. It means *being* the other person, at least for a while, and postponing skeptical analysis until later. ... Most of all it means trying to look at one's own group's behavior honestly, as it might ap-

pear when seen through the other's eyes, recognizing that his eyes are almost certainly jaundiced, but recognizing also that he has the advantage of not seeing our group's behavior through the rose-colored glasses that we ourselves normally wear. He may have grounds for distrust, fear, and anger that we have not permitted ourselves to see. That is the point where honesty comes in. An honest look at the other implies an honest look at oneself. (p. 160–161)

In *The Fog of War*, McNamara applied White's concept of empathy to this question: Why were he and his colleagues in the Kennedy administration able to escape the Cuban missile crisis without a catastrophic war, whereas virtually the same group of advisers in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations led the United States into the worst foreign policy disaster in American history—the war in Vietnam? His answer: Deploying empathy in one case and not deploying empathy in the other.

In the missile crisis, leaders in Washington empathized successfully with Nikita Khrushchev and his colleagues in Moscow—as McNamara said in the film, “we did put ourselves in the skin of the Soviets.” Kennedy was able, with the crucial assistance of Soviet specialist Llewellyn Thompson—whom McNamara referred to as “our in-house Russian” (McNamara & Blight, 2003, p. 72)—to offer Khrushchev a deal he could accept. But with regard to Vietnam, McNamara said in the film, “we didn't know them [the Vietnamese communists] well enough to empathize.” And so, despite the efforts of several presidents, and many (otherwise) able advisers, U.S. leaders appear not even to have fathomed the basic assumptions of their Vietnamese adversary, even after the war had escalated to catastrophic proportions (McNamara & Blight, 2003, p. 79).

In *The Fog of War*, McNamara described the situation that Kennedy and his advisers faced on October 27, 1962. President Kennedy was angry at both Khrushchev and his own advisors. The Soviet leader had sent him, on October 26, a private letter with terms of a deal that could end the standoff: The United States would pledge not to invade Cuba; the Soviets would pledge to remove the missiles from Cuba. But before he could respond, another letter came in from Khrushchev, this one a public announcement, adding a contingency to the deal previously proposed: that the United States also pledge to remove North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) missiles from Turkey. Kennedy's advisers had told him that the Turks, staunch NATO allies, would be furious if the removal of NATO missiles in Turkey were to become part of the deal. Kennedy, however, told his advisers point blank that, because of the NATO missiles in Turkey, that country would likely be a target in any Soviet retaliation for a U.S. attack on the Soviet missiles in Cuba. It was clear that, in Kennedy's mind, attacks on both Soviet missiles in Cuba and NATO missiles in Turkey were likely if the crisis was not resolved quickly. Ken-

nedly also believed, correctly in our view, that following these attacks, escalation to nuclear war was virtually certain.

The following excerpt from Kennedy's secret audiotapes of the missile crisis deliberations illuminates one of the most momentous and pivotal decision points in this most dangerous crisis of the Cold War. Kennedy believed the public letter must represent Khrushchev's official position. He would have liked to respond only to the first (private) letter, which omitted mention of the Turkish missiles. But as a politician, he was convinced that a leader's public pronouncement carried more weight than a private feeler. But then Llewellyn ("Tommy") Thompson disagreed with the president and challenged him to respond to the first (private) letter, more or less as if the second (public) letter did not exist. Thompson was, in official terms, the lowest ranking advisor at the table. Yet he commanded great respect from the others for his intimate knowledge of all things Russian, including Nikita Khrushchev, whom Thompson knew well:

President Kennedy: It seems to me we ought to—to be reasonable. We're not going to get these weapons out of Cuba, probably, anyway. But I mean—by negotiation. We're going to have to take our weapons out of Turkey. I don't think there's any doubt he's not going to, now that he made that public. Tommy, he's not going to take them out of Cuba if we—

Llewellyn Thompson: I don't agree, Mr. President. I think there's still a chance that we can get this line going.

President Kennedy: That he'll back down?

Thompson: Well, because he's already got this other proposal which he put forward [to remove missiles for a pledge not to invade Cuba].

President Kennedy: Now, this other public one, it seems to me, has become their public position, hasn't it?

Thompson: This is maybe just pressure on us. I mean to accept the other, I mean so far—we'd accepted noninvasion of Cuba.

[Unclear group discussion.]

Thompson: The important thing for Khrushchev, it seems to me, is to be able to say: "I saved Cuba. I stopped an invasion."

And he can get away with this if he wants to, and he's had a go at this Turkey thing, and that we'll discuss later. And then, in that discussion, he will probably take—

President Kennedy: All right. (May & Zelikow, 1997, p. 554; see also McNamara & Blight, 2003, p. 71; and Blight & Lang, in press, chap. 1.)

It is difficult to say which act was more timely or courageous: Thompson's in opposing his president, or Kennedy's in accepting the counterintuitive advice of his adviser.

## EMPATHY AND THE CRITICAL ORAL HISTORY OF THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

The deployment of empathy at the height of the missile crisis, via Kennedy's trust in Thompson's knowledge of Khrushchev and his political situation, does not mean that Kennedy and his advisors uniformly applied empathy in their policies. They did not. For instance, the virtual absence of empathy toward either the Soviet Union or Cuba was, arguably, a prime cause of the crisis itself.

This realization did not come to McNamara "on the job." It developed during the course of his long-term participation in our multiyear research project on the Cuban missile crisis. The research method that we employed—critical oral history—involved former policymakers (especially those with opposing views), scholarly specialists, and declassified documents that provided a glimpse of the paper trail at the time (Blight & Lang, 1995; Blight, Allyn, & Welch, 2002). Cross-examination by former adversaries permits decision makers to see the sometimes vast chasm between what they believed at the time about their adversary's intentions and capabilities and what was actually the case (Postel, 2002).

For a quarter century after the Cuban missile crisis, United States former officials and scholars still had no clear idea why Nikita Khrushchev took such a gargantuan risk in deploying Soviet strategic nuclear missiles in Cuba, a mere 90 miles south of Key West, Florida. The feeling among Western historians was that only a desperate leader would resort to such a scheme—someone who felt his back was to the wall. The vast majority had concluded that Khrushchev must have been driven by the fear of falling even further behind in the nuclear arms race, and that he could score both strategic and psychological points against a (presumably) shocked Kennedy administration if he could get away with such a deployment (Allison, 1971; Garthoff, 1987).

But in October 1987, at a critical oral history conference on the 25th anniversary of the crisis, McNamara and his colleagues from the Kennedy administration learned that Khrushchev had another motive, one that was perhaps even more powerful than the urge to try to catch up quickly with the United States in nuclear forces. That motive was the fear of an imminent U.S. invasion of Cuba, the overthrow of the Cuban government of a new and popular Soviet ally, Fidel Castro, and the replacement by a hand-picked group of Cuban exiles waiting in Miami for orders from their U.S. sponsor, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

The following conversation occurred after the former U.S. officials were told that Moscow had been convinced that a U.S. invasion of Cuba was virtually inevitable and, by the spring and summer of 1962, imminent. Sergo Mikoyan, a former aide to his father Anastas Mikoyan, the first deputy premier under Khrushchev, and Georgy Shakhnazarov, a top level official under the (then) Soviet Chairman Mikhail Gorbachev, told their U.S. interlocutors that Soviet leaders in 1962, espe-

cially Khrushchev, felt that the rapid, clandestine, and deceptive deployment of Soviet missiles in Cuba seemed the only way to avert a U.S. overthrow of the Castro regime. The former Kennedy administration officials were stunned by this revelation, principally because they recalled vividly that, after the Bay of Pigs fiasco of April 1961, Kennedy had ruled out any further unprovoked effort to overthrow Castro:

Sergo Mikoyan: I think all the [Soviet] participants in the discussion agreed that the United States was preparing for the liquidation of the Castro regime ... there were invasion plans.

Joseph S. Nye, Jr. (Moderator): There was also a covert operation at the time code-named "Mongoose," whose aim was to destabilize or overthrow the Castro regime. I don't believe the public knew about it, but the Soviets certainly would have. Mac?

McGeorge Bundy (former National Security Adviser): I remember that in the fall of '62 there was great frustration about Cuba and considerable confusion about what we should do. In my opinion, covert action is a psychological salve for inaction. We had no intention to invade Cuba, but it seems from what you say there was a very solid picture in Moscow that we were going to do something more than we were.

Robert S. McNamara: Let me say we had no plan to invade Cuba, and I would have opposed the idea strongly if it ever came up.

Theodore C. Sorensen (Special Counsel to President Kennedy): Well, that's the wrong word.

McNamara: Okay, we had no intent.

Georgy Shakhnazarov: But there were subversive actions.

McNamara: That's my point. We thought those covert operations were terribly ineffective, and you thought they were ominous. We saw them very differently.

Nye: That's an important point for our discussion of lessons. Small actions can be misperceived in important ways, with disproportionate consequences.

McNamara: That's absolutely right. I can assure you that there was no intent in the White House or in the Pentagon—at least in my Pentagon—to overthrow Castro by force. But if I were on your side, I'd have thought otherwise. I can very easily imagine estimating that an invasion was imminent.

Shakhnazarov: I do not wish to turn the meeting into reciprocal accusation. I am inclined to believe you. (Blight & Welch, 1990, pp. 249–250; see also Blight & Lang, 1995, p. 247; and Blight & Lang, in press, chap. 1.)

McNamara's "empathy tutorial"—on the chasm between what our actions look like to us and what they look like to our adversaries—continued at the next critical oral history conference in Moscow, in January 1989. Here, an epochal confronta-



tion occurred, due to the first-ever participation of a high-level Cuban delegation in the ongoing U.S.–Soviet discussions of the Cuban missile crisis. The Cuban group was led by Jorge Risquet, a volatile cigar-smoking revolutionary, who was then the Cuban Politburo member responsible for Cuba’s relations with socialist countries, including, of course, the Soviet Union. Just prior to the conference, the Cubans had acquired from the U.S. sponsors of the conference the just-declassified plans for Operation MONGOOSE, the program of covert operations against Cuba, carried out by Cuban exiles in the employ of the CIA—the one that McGeorge Bundy had described as “a psychological salve for inaction.”

Here, we eavesdrop on the conversation that occurred just after McNamara read over the documents, as the conference was about to begin. He saw clearly why the Cubans (and the Soviets) believed that a U.S. invasion of Cuba was imminent. At the outset of the meeting, McNamara had asked to speak first, so that he could address preemptively the issue he knew would be foremost on the minds of the members of the Cuban delegation: the planning for a U.S. invasion of Cuba and the role of Operation MONGOOSE in that planning. McNamara’s surprising intervention elicited an unexpectedly agreeable response from the fiery Jorge Risquet:

Robert S. McNamara: I want to state quite frankly that with hindsight, if I had been a Cuban leader, I think I might have expected a U.S. invasion. Why? Because the U.S. had carried out what I have referred to publicly as a debacle—the Bay of Pigs invasion—we’d carried it out in the sense that we’d supported it. We did not support it militarily—and I think this should be recognized and emphasized, as it was specifically the decision of President Kennedy *not* to support it with the use of U.S. military force—but in any event we’d carried it out, and after the debacle, there were many voices in the United States that said the error was not in approving the Bay of Pigs operation; the error was in the failure to support it with military force, the implication being that at some point in the future, force would be applied ... There were [also] covert operations. The Cubans knew that. There were covert operations extending over a long period of time ... from the late 1950s into the period we’re discussing, the summer and fall of 1962 ... [Finally] there were important voices in the United States—important leaders in the Senate, important leaders of our House—who were calling for an invasion of Cuba.

The second point I want to make—and I think it shows the degree of misperception that can exist ... in the nuclear age, the danger to all of us—it was a misperception on the part of the Cubans and Soviets ... I can state this categorically, without qualification, and with the certainty that I am speaking not only of my own knowledge, but of my understanding—and I think it was complete—of the mind of President Kennedy ...

we had *absolutely* no intention of invading Cuba ... therefore the Soviet action to install missiles ... was, I think, based on a misconception—a clearly understandable one, and one that we, in part, were responsible for. I accept that. ...

Jorge Risquet: I am amazed at Mr. McNamara's frankness in acknowledging that if he had found himself in the Cubans' shoes, the Cuban side had every right to think that there could be a direct invasion by the Americans. (Allyn, Blight, & Welch, 1992, p. 7–9, 14; see also Blight & Lang, 1995, p. 250; and Blight & Lang; in press, chap. 1.)

As McNamara noted in *The Fog of War*: “What I'm doing is thinking through with hindsight. But you don't have hindsight available at the time” (Morris, 2003a). In Ralph White's terms, therefore, the following central question arises: What can be done to generate, in real-time foreign policymaking, the degree of empathy (and thus of insight) perceived by McNamara and others during the critical oral history process?

## EMPATHY AND THE CRITICAL ORAL HISTORY OF THE VIETNAM WAR

McNamara's retrospective “empathy tutorial” continued several years later when he again participated in another of our multiyear critical oral history projects, this one on the Vietnam war. In June 1997, the first-ever historical conference with high-level former North Vietnamese and U.S. officials was held in Hanoi to discuss the escalation of the American war in Vietnam.

Some background may be helpful, at this point, on McNamara and the war with which he is so closely associated. He began to suspect that the war in Vietnam was unwinnable as early as November 1965, less than 6 months after President Johnson decided to send large numbers of combat troops to assist the Saigon government. Due in large part to his conviction that the Vietnam conflict had no strictly military solution, McNamara spearheaded many efforts to probe the Hanoi government—to determine the conditions under which the fighting could be ended and the warring parties moved to the negotiating table. Several dozen initiatives of this sort were undertaken between mid-1965 and the end of 1967. They all ended in failure, however. In the 30-year interval between the 1960s and the historic June 1997 conference on the war in Hanoi, McNamara recalled often wanting to ask leaders in Hanoi why they spurned offers to negotiate an end to the war, offers that he, as the U.S. defense secretary, authorized and that he obviously regarded as serious (McNamara, 1996, pp. 230–231; McNamara, Blight, & Brigham, 1999, pp. 219–312). So McNamara, sitting at last across from his counterparts from Hanoi, lead off with a question he had been waiting 3 decades to ask: Why did the leadership of North Vietnam not take the U.S. overtures seriously?

The stage was set for one of the most emotional and pivotal moments of that conference and in fact of the entire (by now) nearly decade-long research process. Tran Quang Co, the former first deputy foreign minister, understood McNamara not to be asking a question primarily about the U.S. peace probes, which was his intent, but rather to be subtly accusing the Hanoi leadership of crimes against their own people—of supreme insensitivity to the pain and suffering of the Vietnamese people. Working up to a fever pitch of emotion, Tran Quang Co suddenly switched from Vietnamese into English and accused McNamara of being “wrong, terribly wrong,” a phrase made famous by McNamara himself in his memoir of the war (McNamara, 1996). Tran Quang Co’s intervention ended abruptly, followed by a long and eerie silence.

Dao Huy Ngoc, who was chairing the session, finally added that the Vietnamese people had suffered from invasions and occupations for more than 4,000 years but in the end they always prevailed. The invaders and occupiers eventually went home, just as the Americans went home. The discussion was concluded by Nguyen Co Thach, the former Vietnamese foreign minister and head of the Vietnamese delegation, who added that although leaders in Hanoi certainly wanted peace, the Vietnamese had never accepted “peace at any price.” Here is an excerpt from the exchange, which occurred in June 1997, almost exactly 30 years after the failure of the last of the McNamara-led peace feelers:

Robert S. McNamara: My belief is that there could have been negotiations between the end of ‘65 and ‘68 which would have led to a settlement that was roughly the same as the one that eventually occurred, but without that terrible loss of life.

Why didn’t it occur? Were you not influenced by the loss of lives? Why didn’t it move you toward negotiations? Wasn’t there, from your point of view, reason to probe the degree to which you could have “manipulated” the negotiations in ways that would have been favorable to you? Why didn’t you at least probe the degree to which we could have been persuaded to reduce the military pressure, to move toward a unified Vietnam, unaligned. Now in a sense that’s what ultimately happened. But at a tremendous cost in human life. Why weren’t the negotiations started earlier? I have not heard anything this morning that answers that question.

Tran Quang Co: I would like to answer Mr. McNamara’s question. You imply that there was a difference in attitude toward the war between the people of North [Vietnam] and the North Vietnamese leadership. You have this misconception that even though the Vietnamese people were suffering because of the war, still the Vietnamese leadership did not want peace, did not want to proceed to peace.

I must say that this question of Mr. McNamara’s has allowed us to better understand the issue. During the coffee break, an American colleague asked me if I have learned anything about the U.S. during the discussions

of the past few days. And I responded that I have learned quite a lot. However, thanks to this particular question, I believe we have learned still more about the U.S. We understand better now that the U.S. understands very little about Vietnam. Even now—in this conference—the U.S. understands very little about Vietnam.

When the U.S. bombed the North and brought its troops into the South, well, of course to us these were very negative moves. However, with regards to Vietnam, U.S. aggression did have some positive use. Never before did the people of Vietnam, from top to bottom, unite as they did during the years that the U.S. was bombing us. Never before had Chairman Ho Chi Minh's appeal—that there is nothing more precious than freedom and independence—go straight to the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people as at the end of 1966.

But if Mr. McNamara thinks that the North Vietnamese leadership was not concerned about the suffering of the Vietnamese people, with deaths and privation, then he has a huge misconception of Vietnam. That would be [Speaks in English] “wrong, terribly wrong.” [Resumes in Vietnamese] There was never any such thing. On the contrary, if at that time we had begun negotiations with the U.S., we would have had to explain to the people why we could negotiate with the U.S., to meet with the U.S., and host the U.S., while bombs fell on us. On the contrary, it must be said that at those moments, when the bombs were falling, there was a complete unity between the leaders and the people. There could be no negotiations under the pressure of the bombing. We have to keep in mind that the war occurred on Vietnamese soil, not in America. Because we suffered a thousand times more than you, we needed and sought peace all the more.

Dao Huy Ngoc: When you look at this question of the sacrifice made by Vietnam in the war, you must also consider the history of our country. When we gained our independence in 1945 we already had four thousand years of history. For one thousand years, we were under the feudal control of the North [of China]. We had to fight in order to regain our independence. And three thousand years later we had to fight to regain our independence again. Then after independence—after the August Revolution [of 1945, against Japanese occupation]—we had to fight the French for nine years in order to protect our independence. Only then came the fight against the U.S.

So, yes, I would agree with what Mr. McNamara has said. The price that we have had to pay is huge. But it is far larger, and has been going on for much longer, than Mr. McNamara referred to—during the three years of the Vietnam war—1965 to 1968.

Nguyen Co Thach: I ask you: why on earth would Vietnam *not* be serious about peace? The war was on Vietnamese soil. Why would Vietnam not

want peace? We wanted the war to end early—as soon as possible—the earlier the better, the less our people would have to suffer. I can assure you, we wanted peace very badly. But not at any price, not if we had to give up what we were fighting for. But still, we wanted—the Vietnamese people wanted—peace.

I wanted to emphasize this because, based on questions from some reporters outside this conference, and some things said by the participants here, some may have gotten the impression that Vietnam—that Vietnamese leaders—did not care about the lives of the Vietnamese people—that Vietnam would not think much about those Vietnamese who lost their lives—the many who lost their lives. Let me just say this: those who believe this—if any of you believe this [Gestures at U.S. participants.]—this is wrong, this is very wrong—a complete misunderstanding of Vietnam. (McNamara et al., 1999, pp. 254–256; see also Blight & Lang, in press, chap. 1)

In applying critical oral history to the Cuban Missile Crisis and to the Vietnam War, it is at last possible to identify, unambiguously, the lack of empathy (that Washington, Moscow, and Havana on the one hand and Washington and Hanoi on the other, had for one another) as the culprit. This helps us to understand all aspects of the missile crisis, from inception—where there is no evidence of empathy—to its resolution—where it appears that there was just enough empathy, just in time. For the Vietnam War, there is no evidence of empathy whatsoever during the conduct of the war. Empathy, as Ralph White emphasized, is not sympathy or agreement with the view of the adversary but the capacity to see the situation as the adversary sees it and to feel it as the adversary feels it. Only in 1997 was there evidence of nascent empathy as McNamara and his colleagues finally got to “know” their former Vietnamese enemies—at the volatile June 1997 conference, and a half dozen subsequent conferences held in Vietnam, Italy, and the United States (Biersteker, 1997; see also McNamara & Biersteker, 1999; and Blight & Lang, in press, chap. 1).

Lacking empathy, policymakers make decisions based on fantasy rather than on fact. Lacking empathy, misperception, misunderstanding, and misjudgment run rampant. Lacking empathy, leaders brought the world to the brink of nuclear war over missiles in Cuba and escalated a small-scale civil war in Southeast Asia to a regional catastrophe.

## EMPATHY AND THE SECOND WORLD WAR

In *Wilson's Ghost*, McNamara and Blight (2003, pp. 270–274) presented a case study of Charles Simic, a distinguished poet who recently reviewed (Simic, 2003)

*On the Natural History of Destruction* (Sebald, 2002), a nonfiction book by the late German novelist W. G. Sebald. The book broke a taboo among Germans that discourages public discussion of their own suffering during Allied “saturation bombing” toward the end of the Second World War—a war that the Germans started, a war in which the Germans ordered the deaths of millions of innocent people. Simic, who grew up in Yugoslavia during the war, noted the obvious: that the bombing of all major German cities (and many minor ones) seemed to many to be just and deserving punishment for such a people. “I understand the emotion perfectly,” wrote Simic, “I grew up hating Germans” (p.10).

Simic (2003) shed few tears on reading in Sebald’s (2002) book that the Allies had destroyed 131 German cities or even when he read that 600,000 German civilians were killed in the bombings and 7.5 million Germans were left starving and homeless. Statistics like these refer, at a distance, to a lot of evil Germans who seemed to many to have gotten what was coming to them. Yet at the same time, they refer to no German in particular.

But the power of Sebald’s (2002) book is that he reported not simply statistics but also the experiences of individual Germans. Simic (2003) cited Sebald’s reporting from the diary of a refugee named Friedrich Reck, as almost “too much.” It is deeply affecting in a way that a roomful of statistics cannot be: that those Germans who supposedly “had it coming to them” were human beings, too, people who suffered tragedies beyond what anyone ought to have to suffer. Reck recounted a fleeting moment during which he was desperately trying to force his way onto a train in Bavaria. In all the pushing and shoving, a cardboard suitcase “falls on the platform, bursts open and spills its contents. Toys, a manicure case, singed underwear. And last of all the roasted corpse of a child, shrunk like a mummy, which its half-deranged mother has been carrying about with her” (Sebald, 2002, p. 29; Simic, 2003, p. 10). This, Sebald was telling us, was what really happened at the end of the war in Germany. This was what human beings really did to other human beings. One feels powerfully in the presence of such an image that not only Germans were culpable but so were those who were their enemies. Even for those, like Simic, who suffered terribly at the hands of Nazis, moral clarity begins to give way to moral accuracy and it does so because only those with hearts of stone can fail to empathize with those whose suffering is so strikingly described.

The Pacific War was no less brutal and cruel than the war against Nazi Germany and some would argue that it was worse (Dower, 1986). In *The Fog of War*, McNamara recounted that he was “on the island of Guam ... in March 1945” and that in a “single night, we burned to death 100,000 Japanese civilians in Tokyo: men, women, and children.” But Tokyo was only one of 67 Japanese cities bombed between March and August of 1945. This “area bombing”—much of it incendiary—destroyed 50% to 90% of these 67 cities and may have killed as many

as 1 million civilians (Kerr, 1991, p. 324–325). Nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki followed this conventional bombing campaign.

As with Simic and the Germans, the majority of civilian and military leaders, and most ordinary Americans, felt that the Japanese “deserved it.” But again, a look at the lives of individual Japanese civilians erodes that simplistic conclusion. To state the obvious: Those on the receiving end of the U.S. campaign to burn up Japan saw the situation differently from American bomber crews or their commanding generals and their subordinates. Their stories are wrenching, heartbreaking. Here is an eyewitness account of being near “ground zero” during the massive firebombing of Tsuruga on July 12, 1945:

The enemy’s large formation of aircraft dropped incendiary bombs as if they were dumping water on the city. The shore breeze fanned the flames rising from various places in the blacked-out, silent city, turning it instantly into a living hell.

I was then stationed as a communications officer in the Central Area Detachment (136th unit). I set out before dawn the following morning on a scouting mission to assess the damage to the demolished communication lines and prepare for recovery. Amid the stench of death emanating from the still burning bodies of many victims, I urged my reluctant horse forward and rushed about the city. I was shocked to see a firebomb sitting like a porcupine on the white gravel on the grounds of Kibi Shrine.

As day broke, I saw a burned-out wasteland almost devoid of people. In the distance a lone elderly woman in a kimono and wooden clogs repeatedly leaned over to pick up pieces of something with chopsticks. She put the pieces on a plate. I approached her and asked her what she was doing. With a stately and unflinching demeanor, she replied, “I’ve lost everything, and now my daughter has turned into this. I want to have a keepsake of my daughter so that I can pray for her soul.” So saying she continued to pick up and place on the dish pieces of brain from her daughter’s burnt skull.

I had seen many scenes of the wretchedness of war, but this scene of a mother’s love for her child impressed on me the cruelty of war, which causes such pain for innocent citizens. The scene was so brutal that I have kept it to myself, but I decided to send this in after reading the column.

Otsubo Hiroaki, sixty-four (male), retired, Kamio (Gibney, 1995, p. 208; see also Blight & Lang, in press, chap. 4)

Blotting out these images—of the German mother at the train station and the Japanese mother at the ruins—and countless others like them in terms of the degree of suffering they connote, is the price one pays for the degree of “moral clarity” that permitted the Allies to pulverize and burn up German and Japanese cities and their inhabitants. It is a “moral clarity” that allows us in the United States and Great Britain, even today, to speak without irony of the Second World War as “The Good War.” One hardly need be an apologist for the Nazis or Japanese warlords to see that the real war was a good deal more complicated than that. There was, in fact, plenty of evil to go around—to both the victors and the vanquished.

## THE EMPATHY IMPERATIVE AND POST-9/11 U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

McNamara and Blight recently collaborated on a “21st Century Manifesto,” a set of recommendations for U.S. foreign policy based on McNamara’s decades-long experience in government and public service and Blight’s decades-long research, via critical oral history, into foreign policy disasters during the Cold War. The result appears in their *Wilson’s Ghost: Reducing the Risk of Conflict, Killing, and Catastrophe in the 21st Century* (McNamara & Blight, 2003, pp. xvii–xviii). The influence of Ralph White on *Wilson’s Ghost* is unmistakable and direct (e.g., see pp. 64–73; 230–276). Deploying empathy, for example, is their corrective for halting and even reversing the deterioration of relations between the United States and Russia and the United States and China. McNamara and Blight called for

[A] policy whose objective is not to preach but to listen; to learn something of the history and culture of Russia and China, rather than to proclaim the virtues of our history and systems; to treat them, in effect, as our equals, as peoples and cultures who seek peace and tranquillity but also dignity and respect. (2003, p. 65)

After 9/11, McNamara and Blight revised *Wilson’s Ghost* (the first edition of which appeared in June 2001) by adding a 46-page “Afterword” for the paperback edition (McNamara & Blight, 2003, pp. 230–276). In this Afterword, “Wilson’s Ghost in the Post-9/11 World,” they affirmed, even more strongly than in the first edition, the need to deploy empathy toward our adversaries. In fact, in light of the September 11 attacks, they elevated the deployment of realistic empathy to the status of a third imperative of equal stature to the moral imperative [to reduce carnage] and the multilateral imperative [never to use U.S. military, political, or economic power unilaterally] that they advanced in the first edition:

*The Empathy Imperative.* The West, led by the United States, must seek by all possible means to increase its understanding of the history, culture, religion, motives, and attitudes of those who have declared themselves to be its adversaries. This effort should begin by developing empathy toward the Islamic fundamentalists, specifically those groups allied with, or sympathetic to, the international terrorist network known as al-Qaeda. Empathy does not imply sympathy or agreement; it does imply curiosity, leading to deeper understanding of an adversary’s mindset, as a prerequisite to resolving differences and eliminating threats to peace and security. (p. 234)

McNamara and Blight (2003) further argued that the United States must rethink its attitude toward both (a) that part of the Islamic world that is sympathetic to the objectives of the al-Qaeda network (if not its terrorist methods) and (b) the trio of states that President Bush unfortunately characterized as the “axis of evil”: Iraq,



North Korea, and Iran. Linking a widespread lack of empathy with “moral clarity,” they invoked the work of the American theologian and philosopher Reinhold Niebuhr and suggested instead that the quest for “moral clarity” be replaced by the quest for moral accuracy (Niebuhr, 1952). They invoked Niebuhr’s powerful question, one that McNamara later went on to use in *The Fog of War*: “How much evil must we do in order to do good?”

Pondering this question begins with empathy, with curiosity about one’s opponents, which leads to a more nuanced look at adversaries and at oneself. So-called moral clarity too easily degenerates into a comfortable moral anesthesia, made possible by a refusal to empathize. As Niebuhr emphasized, “moral clarity” in international affairs is really self-deception. One succumbs, in these cases, to the illusion that whole peoples are undilutedly “evil” vis-à-vis one’s own people, who are “good”—virtuous, on the side of right, and so forth.

McNamara and Blight (2003) then turned their attention to the ways in which we insulate ourselves from the full impact of the killing that is inherent in war. They noted that it is typical, for example, to say that it is not the Muslim people or the Iraqi people or the North Korean people or the Iranian people who are evil. It is their respective organizations, ruling regimes, and leaders to whom we object. But they asked: What happens when push comes to shove and war breaks out? Surely in any war involving the United States a key feature of that war will be heavy bombing, during the course of which many innocent civilians are sure to perish. By labeling this unavoidable “collateral damage,” we comfort ourselves by steering clear of what it really is like on the receiving end of the punishment that is meted out. McNamara and Blight described this as “reducing, in effect, our reserves of empathy to as near absolute zero as possible” (p. 271).

Here is the lesson of Ralph White, of *Wilson’s Ghost*, and of *The Fog of War*: Too little empathy can produce too much “moral clarity.” And too much “moral clarity” can make conflict, killing, and catastrophe more likely, by making them seem less horrible than they really are or by offering the illusion that any killing of the enemy is done to eradicate evil and to establish that which is good.

Adding empathy to the equation raises obstacles to inflicting pain and suffering on our fellow human beings by helping us to resist the easy slide toward characterizing all adversaries and their actions as “evil.” It can even make it possible for us to confront the full force of the terrifying question Reinhold Niebuhr would require us to ask. It is a query whose structure is, according to Niebuhr (1932), a more accurate representation of the terrible reality of international affairs—of what he called “moral man in an immoral international society” (p. xxv). No matter how difficult, how incriminating, or how perplexing it may be, those contemplating war, or considering actions during a war, need to ask, “How much evil must we do in order to do good?” We can think of no more pertinent piece of advice to offer to parties on all sides of the confrontation and conflict that has engulfed the United States, and the world, in the wake of the September 11, 2001,

attacks (Blight & McNamara, 2003). This message is also, we note, implied in the pivotal work of Ralph White, who taught us that “empathy is the *great* corrective for all forms of war-promoting misperception . . . . It [means] simply understanding the thoughts and feelings of others” (White, 1984, p. 160). It is his—it is our, it is Robert McNamara’s, it is Errol Morris’s, and it should be all foreign and defense policymakers’—Lesson Number One.

### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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