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Fog-Colored Glasses: War and the Individual

The Dalai Lama said, “The ultimate authority must always rest with the individual's own reason and critical analysis.” Whether that be an individual citizen of a country or the individual that citizens elect to run it, the *individual* has underestimated power and influence in global politics. It goes both ways: the power of the people to elect a leader and the power of a leader to sway a people and politics. A person looks at the world through a lens of their views, experiences and values. The “fog of war” refers to the blurring and clouding of that lens during a crisis like war.

The constructivist approach opines that there is no singular narrative, that the narrative is defined by who is in power. The individual in power at the time then determines the narrative of the country and the country’s relationship to states and non-state actors. Would the USA have invaded Iraq and Afghanistan to the extent it did if Al Gore had won the election? Would the USA have pulled out of the Paris Climate Accords if Trump had not been elected? Would the USA have escalated their involvement in Vietnam had John F. Kennedy been alive to finish his term?

We read about how the rational actor model assumes all decision-makers act rationally, but Robert McNamara says, “Rationality will not save us.” Rationality can only go so far in predicting the actions of a leader. One must also consider factors like their experience, beliefs, worldviews, motivations, political ideologies, religion, perception, intelligence, and interests. McNamara’s involvement in the military during World War II shaped his relationship with war and defense. His work on market research and automobile safety at Ford also influenced his decisions as Secretary of Defense.

McNamara’s worldview regarding which international relations theory he subscribed to also influenced him. Based on the text’s description of realism, one could say that McNamara viewed global politics through a realist lens. He viewed human nature as unchanging and the core of foreign policy. He assisted General Curtis LeMay in a series of bombings of Japan that killed hundreds of thousands of civilians. While he questioned whether this was moral, he also posited the alternative, asking whether it would be better for American soldiers to be slaughtered on the beaches instead. At the time, it felt justified as a cost of war in LeMay’s ideology that “War is cruelty,” an example of the realist instinct of survival and self-help in an anarchical system.

Had he subscribed to a critical theory, his immediate response to the Japan bombings may have been to focus on proportional response or to limit casualties. A constructivist view would have turned him away from the realpolitik idea of power as a be-all-end-all. A feminist approach would have channeled attention to the underrepresented and the individual. A radical

liberal or utopian view would have prioritized human security over national security. He may have relied more on soft power than hard power, though it is difficult to define what is the right implementation of power during a war. McNamara's worldview impacted the choices he made, thus impacting the foreign and defense policy that America chose to pursue.

Within an individual's lifetime, their thoughts and perceptions may change. At the time of the interview, McNamara seems to espouse more liberalist views of international security communities and reciprocity. He looks back in hindsight, recognizing the mistakes he made, as what one could describe as a delayed evaluation of foreign policy. Had McNamara felt this way when he was Secretary of Defense or when he was fighting in World War II, would his advice have been different? Over the course of one's life, the experiences they gain change their view and thus their impact on international relations.

A person also influences and is influenced by those who surround them, from the articulation phase to formulation to implementation. Globally and locally, individuals who are passionate about issues work independently if they have a significant platform or group together to form foundations, think tanks, NGOs and interest groups. These non-state actors influence the initiation of foreign policy. In times of normalcy and crisis, the counsel of peers as well as an individual's "own reason and critical analysis" determine how they will respond and what policy is formed in terms of statecraft. In the American system of government, we see how the individual plays a role from congressional committee assignments to appointments to the Cabinet. These actors are all links in the chain that leads to the implementation of a policy.

In the film, McNamara talks about a tipping point at which the possibility of nuclear warfare seemed very real – the Cuban Missile Crisis. Every individual that participated in that exchange was crucial to the escalation or prevention of all-out nuclear attacks from either side. First was the authority of the advice that McNamara gave because of the position he had. McNamara says, "Kennedy was trying to keep us out of war. I was trying to help him keep us out of war. And General Curtis LeMay, whom I served under as a matter of fact in World War II, was saying 'Let's go in, let's totally destroy Cuba.'" Had LeMay been an advisor to Kennedy with as much authority as McNamara had, the US may have responded more aggressively. Second were the two messages sent from Moscow, one a belligerent one and the other a more cooperative one. Had the USSR not had a non-hardliner who sent the first message, there would not have been a "soft" message to reply to. The third was former US Ambassador to Moscow, Tommy Thompson, who urged Kennedy to respond to the soft message that Khrushchev sent even after Kennedy suggested that it would not work. Because of Thompson's experience working with Khrushchev, he was able to find the reasoning behind his actions and advise Kennedy accordingly. Just like a series of dominos or magnets, had any of these individuals in this chain been a different person or said something different, it could have had catastrophic results for the whole world.

The phrase "the fog of war" as McNamara defines it boils down to his eleventh lesson – you can't change human nature. He says, "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." Human nature at its best is flawed, and yet, we entrust it with

the decisions to determine our and others' lives and deaths. He acknowledges that war leads to unnecessary detriment. Yet, he says that he is not naïve enough to think that we can end war because, during war, blinded by the fog of crisis, an individual is left to act on their own reason and critical analysis.

War and peace – and more broadly, life and death – are subject to individuals and their choices. While McNamara may advocate reducing war and killing at the end of his career and life, earlier on in his career he did not. A leader that preceded or succeeded him may have learned different lessons and made different choices. Each individual who has the power to influence others is driven by their individuality, and all one can do is share what they have learned as McNamara does in this film. Had he not been asked by Robert Kennedy to become the Secretary of Defense, the trajectory of the Vietnam War in the '60s may have been very different. Wayne Dyer says, "Our lives are a sum total of the choices we have made." In the same way, our foreign policies are the sum total of the choice the people make of who they want to lead and the choices those leaders make.