McNamara: Is this chart at a reasonable height? Or do you want it lowered? Earlier tonight — let me first ask the T.V., are you ready? All set? Let me hear your voice level to make sure it’s the same.

EM: Okay, how’s my voice level?

McNamara: That’s fine.

EM: Terrific.

McNamara: Now I remember exactly the sentence I left off on. I remember how it started, and I was cut off in the middle. But you can fix it up some way. I don’t want to go back, introduce the sentence, because I know exactly what I wanted to say.

EM: Go ahead!

McNamara: Okay. Any military commander who is honest with himself, or with those he’s speaking to, will admit that he has made mistakes in the application of military power. He’s killed people unnecessarily — his own troops or other troops — through mistakes, through errors of judgment. A hundred, or thousands, or tens of thousands, maybe even a hundred thousand. But, he hasn’t destroyed nations.

And the conventional wisdom is don’t make the same mistake twice, learn from your mistakes. And we all do. Maybe we make the same mistake three times, but hopefully not four or five. They’ll be no learning period with nuclear weapons. You make one mistake and you’re going to destroy nations.

McNamara Gallery

In my life, I’ve been part of wars. 3 years in the U.S. Army during World War II. 7 years as Secretary of Defense during the Vietnam War. 13 years at the World Bank across the world. At my age, 85, I am at 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.

McNamara and the Pentagon

Harry Reasoner: This is the Secretary of Defense of the United States, Robert McNamara. His department absorbs 10% of the national income of this country, and over half of every tax dollar. His job has been called the toughest in Washington, and McNamara is the most controversial figure that has ever held the job. Walter Lippmann calls him not only the best Secretary of Defense, but the first one who ever asserted civilian control over the military. His critics call him “a con—man,” “an IBM machine with legs,” “an arrogant dictator.”

Mr. Secretary, I’ve noticed in several cabinet offices that little silver calendar thing there. Can you explain that?

McNamara: Yes, this was given by President Kennedy. On the calendar are engraved the dates: October 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, and finally 28, were the dates when we literally looked down the gun barrel into nuclear war.

Lesson #1: Empathize with your enemy.
Under a cloak of deceit, the Soviet Union introduced nuclear missiles into Cuba, targeting 90 million Americans. The C.I.A. said the warheads had not been delivered yet. They thought 20 were coming on a ship named the Poltava. We mobilized 180,000 troops. The first day's air attack was planned at 1080 sorties, a huge air attack.

October 16, 1962

Kennedy: In the next 24 hours, what is it we need to do?

McNamara: Mr. President, we need to do two things, it seems to me. First, we need to develop a specific strike plan. The second thing we have to do is to consider the consequences. I don't know quite what kind of a world we'll live in after we've struck Cuba. How do we stop at that point? I don't know the answer to this.

Kennedy: The chances of this becoming a much broader struggle are increased as you step up the... talk about danger to the United States.

McNamara: Kennedy was trying to keep us out of war. I was trying to help him keep up 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."

On that critical Saturday, October 27th, we had two Khrushchev messages in front of us. One had come in Friday night, and it had been dictated by a man who was either drunk or under tremendous stress. Basically, he said, "If you'll guarantee you won't invade Cuba, we'll take the missiles out."

Then before we could respond, we had a second message that had been dictated by a bunch of hard-liners. And it said, in effect, "If you attack, we're prepared to confront you with masses of military power."

So, what to do? We had, I'll call it, the soft message and the hard message.

At the elbow of President Kennedy was Tommy Thompson, former U.S. Ambassador to Moscow. He and Jane, his wife, had literally lived with Khrushchev and his wife upon occasion. Tommy Thompson said, "Mr. President, I urge you to respond to the soft message."

The President said to Tommy, "We can't do that, that'll get us nowhere."

Tommy said, "Mr. President, you're wrong." Now that takes a lot of guts.

October 27, 1962

Kennedy: We're not going to get these missiles out of Cuba, probably anyway, by negotiation.

Thompson: I don't agree, Mr. President. I think there's still a chance.

Kennedy: That he'll back down?

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

McNamara: In Thompson's mind was this thought: Khrushchev's gotten himself in a hell of a fix. He would then think to himself, "My God, if I can get out of this with a deal that I can say to the Russian people: 'Kennedy was going to destroy Castro and I prevented it.'" Thompson, knowing Khrushchev as he did, thought Khrushchev will accept that. And Thompson was right.

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.

Khrushchev’s advisors were saying, “There can be no deal unless you somewhat reduce the pressure on us, when you ask us to reduce the pressure on you.”

EM: Also, we had attempted to invade Cuba.

McNamara: Well, with the Bay of Pigs. That undoubtedly influenced their thinking. I think that’s correct. But, more importantly, from a Cuban and a Russian point of view, they knew what in a sense I really didn’t know: we had attempted to assassinate Castro under Eisenhower and under Kennedy and later under Johnson. And in addition to that, major voices in the U.S. were calling for invasion.

In the first message, Khrushchev said this: “We and you ought not to pull on the ends of a rope which you have tied the knots of war. Because the more the two of us pull, the tighter the knot will be tied. And then it will be necessary to cut that knot, and what that would mean is not for me to explain to you. I have participated in two wars and know that war ends when it has rolled through cities and villages, everywhere sowing death and destruction. For such is the logic of war. If people do not display wisdom, they will clash like blind moles and then mutual annihilation will commence.”

Lesson #2: Rationality will not save us.

I want to say, and this is very important: at the end we lucked out. It was luck that prevented nuclear war. We came that close to nuclear war at the end. Rational individuals: Kennedy was rational; Khrushchev was rational; Castro was rational. Rational individuals came that close to total destruction of their societies. And that danger exists today.

The major lesson of the Cuban missile crisis is this: the indefinite combination of human fallibility and nuclear weapons will destroy nations. Is it right and proper that today there are 7500 strategic offensive nuclear warheads, of which 2500 are on 15 minute alert, to be launched by the decision of one human being?

It wasn’t until January, 1992, in a meeting chaired by Castro in Havana, Cuba, that I learned 162 nuclear warheads, including 90 tactical warheads, were on the island at the time of this critical moment of the crisis. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing, and Castro got very angry with me because I said, “Mr. President, let’s stop this meeting. This is totally new to me, I’m not sure I got the translation right.”

“Mr. President, I have three questions to you. Number one: did you know the nuclear warheads were there? Number two: if you did, would you have recommended to Khrushchev in the face of an U.S. attack that he use them? Number three: if he had used them, what would have happened to Cuba?”

He said, ‘Number one, I knew they were there. Number two, I would not have recommended to Khrushchev, I did recommend to Khrushchev that they be used. Number three, ‘What would have happened to Cuba? It would have been totally destroyed.’ That’s how close we were.

EM: And he was willing to accept that?

Yes, and he went on to say: “Mr. McNamara, if you and President Kennedy had been in a similar situation, that’s what you would have done.” I said, “Mr. President, I hope to God we would not have done it. Pull the temple down on our heads? My God!”

In a sense, we’d won. We got the missiles out without war. My deputy and I brought the five Chiefs over and we sat down with Kennedy. And he said, “Gentlemen, we won. I don’t want you ever to say it, but you know we won, I know we won.”

And LeMay said, “Won? Hell, we lost. We should go in and wipe ‘em out today.”
LeMay believed that ultimately we're going to confront these people in a conflict with nuclear weapons. And, by God, we better do it when we have greater superiority than we will have in the future.

At the time, we had a 17 to 1 strategic advantage in nuclear numbers. We'd done 10 times as many tests as they had. We were certain we could maintain that advantage if we limited the tests. The Chiefs we're all opposed. They said, "The Soviets will cheat." I said, "How will they cheat? You won't believe this, but they said, 'They'll test them behind the moon.'" I said, "You're out of your minds." I said, "That's absurd."

It's almost impossible for our people today to put themselves back into that period. In my 7 years as Secretary, we came within a hair's breath of war with the Soviet Union on three different occasions. 24 hours a day, 365 days a year for 7 years as Secretary of Defense, I lived the Cold War.

During the Kennedy administration, they designed a 100 megaton bomb. It was tested in the atmosphere. I remember this. Cold War? Hell, it was a hot war!

I think the human race needs to think more about killing, about conflict. Is that what we want in this 21st Century?

1918

My earliest memory is of a city exploding with joy. It was November 11, 1918. I was two years old. You may not believe that I have the memory, but I do. I remember the tops of the streetcars being crowded with human beings cheering and kissing and screaming. End of World War I? we'd won. But also celebrating the belief of many Americans? particularly Woodrow Wilson? we'd fought a war to end all wars. His dream was that the world could avoid great wars in the future. Disputes among great nations would be resolved.

I also remember that I wasn't allowed to go outdoors to play with my friends without wearing a mask. There was an un—Godly flu epidemic. Large numbers of Americans were dying. 600,000 and millions across the world.

My class in the first grade was housed in a shack. A wooden shack. But we had an absolutely superb teacher. And this teacher gave a test to the class every month, and she reseated the class based on the results of that test. There were vertical rows, and she put the person with the highest grade in the first seat on the left—hand row. And I worked my tail off to be in that first seat.

Now the majority of the classmates were Whites, Caucasians, so on? Wasps if you will. But my competition for that first seat were Chinese, Japanese, and Jews. On Saturday and Sunday, I went and played with my classmates. They went to their ethnic schools. They learned their native language, they learned their culture, their history. And they came back determined on Monday to beat that damn Irishman. But, they didn't do it very often.

Reasoner: One Congressman called you "Mr. I—have—all—the—answers McNamara." And there's been suggestion from some Congressman that you come up there? in spite of the weight of their experience? prepared to give them simple, little lessons in things. Is that your attitude?

McNamara: No. Perhaps I don't know how much I don't know, and there is much indeed. I do make a serious effort to prepare myself properly for these Congressional discussions. I suppose I spend perhaps a 100 or 120 hours in testifying before Congress each year. And each hour of testimony requires 3 to 4 hours of preparation.

Reasoner: What about the contention that your attitude is sometimes arrogant, that you never admit that you were wrong. Have you ever been wrong, sir?
RSM: Oh, yes indeed. I'm not going to tell you. If you don't know, I'm not going to tell you? oh, on countless occasions.

I applied to Stanford University. I very much wanted to go. But, I couldn't afford it, so I lived at home and I went to Berkeley. $52 dollars a year tuition. I started Berkeley in the bottom of the depression. 25 million males were unemployed.

Out of that class of 3500, three elected to Phi Beta Kappa at the end of the Sophomore year. Of those three, one became a Rhodes Scholar. I went to Harvard. The third went to work for $65 dollars a month and was damn happy to have the job.

The Society was on the verge of ? I don't want to say "revolution." Although, had President Roosevelt not done some of the things he did, it could have become far more violent. In any event, that was what I was thrown into.

I never heard of Plato and Aristotle before I became a Freshman at Berkley. And I remember Professor Lowenberg — the Freshman philosophy professor ? I couldn't wait to go to another class.

Lesson #3: There's something beyond one's self.

I took more philosophy classes ? particularly one in logic and one in ethics. Stress on values and something beyond one's self, and a responsibility to society.

After graduating University of California I went to Harvard graduate school of business for two years and then I went back to San Francisco.

I began to court this young lady that I'd met when we were 17 in our first week at Berkley: Margaret Craig. And I was making some progress after eight or nine months. I proposed and she accepted.

She went with her aunt and her mother on a trip across the country. She telegraphed me? "Must order engraved invitations to include your middle name, what is it?"

And I wired back, "My middle name is 'Strange.'"

And she said "I know it's 'strange,' but what is it?"

Well, I mean it is Strange, it's Robert Strange McNamara.

And it was a marriage made in heaven. At the end of a year we had our first child. The delivery costs were $100, and we paid that $10 a month. Those were some of the happiest days of our life. And then the war came.

I'd been promoted to assistant professor — I was the youngest assistant professor at Harvard? and a salary by the way of $4000 a year. Harvard business school's market was drying up? the males were being drafted or volunteering. So the Dean, being farsighted, brought back a government contract to establish an officer candidate school for what was called "Statistical Control" in the Air Force.

We said to the Air Force, "Look, we're not going to take anybody you send up here. We're going to select the people. You have a punch card for every human being brought into the Air Corps. We're going to run those cards through the IBM sorting machines, and we're going to sort on age, education, accomplishments, grades, etc."

We were looking for the best and the brightest. The best brains, the greatest capacity to lead, the best judgment.

The U.S. was just beginning to bomb. We were bombing by daylight. The loss rate was very, very high, so they commissioned a study. And what did we find? We found the abort rate was 20%. 20% of the planes that took off to bomb targets in Germany turned around before they got to their target. Well that was a hell of a mess? we lost 20% of
our capability right there.

The form, I think it was form 1−A or something like that was a mission report. And if you aborted a mission you had to write down 'why.' So we get all these things and we analyze them, and we finally concluded it was baloney. They were aborting out of fear.

Because the loss rate was 4% per sortie, the combat tour was 25 sorties — it didn't mean that 100% of them were going to be killed but a hell of a lot of them were going to be killed. They knew that and they found reasons to not go over the target. So we reported this.

One of the commanders was Curtis LeMay — Colonel in command of a B−24 group. He was the finest combat commander of any service I came across in war. But he was extraordinarily belligerent, many thought brutal. He got the report. He issued an order. He said, 'I will be in the lead plane on every mission. Any plane that takes off will go over the target, or the crew will be court−marshaled.' The abort rate dropped over night.

Now that's the kind of commander he was.

Announcer: Ladies and Gentlemen, the President of the United States.

Roosevelt: My friends, on this Christmas Eve, there are over ten million men in the Armed Forces of the United States alone. One year ago, one million, seven hundred thousand were serving overseas. By next July 1st, that number will rise to over five million. Plenty of bad news for the Japs in the not too far distant future.

Lesson #4: Maximize Efficiency.

The U.S. Air Force had a new airplane named the B−29. The B−17s and B−24s in Europe bombed from 15,000, 16,000 feet. The problem was they were subject to anti−aircraft fire and to fighter aircraft. To relieve that, this B−29 was being developed that bombed from high altitude and it was thought we could destroy targets much more efficiently and effectively.

I was brought back from the 8th Air Force and assigned to the first B−29s, the 58th Bomb Wing. We had to fly those planes from the bases in Kansas to India. Then we had to fly fuel over the hump into China.

The airfields were built with Chinese labor. It was an insane operation. I can still remember hauling these huge rollers to crush the stone and make them flat. A long rope, somebody would slip. The roller would roll over, everybody would laugh and go on.

We were supposed to take these B−29s ? there were no tanker aircraft there. We were to fill them with fuel, fly from India to Chengtu; offload the fuel; fly back to India; make enough missions to build up fuel in Chengtu; fly to Yawata, Japan; bomb the steel mills; and go back to India.

We had so little training on this problem of maximizing efficiency, we actually found to get some of the B−29s back instead of offloading fuel, they had to take it on. To make a long story short, it wasn't worth a damn. And it was LeMay who really came to that conclusion, and led the Chiefs to move the whole thing to the Marianas, which devastated Japan.

LeMay was focused on only one thing: target destruction. Most Air Force Generals can tell you how many planes they had, how many tons of bombs they dropped, or whatever the hell it was.

But, he was the only person that I knew in the senior command of the Air Force who focused solely on the loss of his crews per unit of target destruction. I was on the island of Guam in his command in March of 1945. In that single night, we burned to
death 100,000 Japanese civilians in Tokyo: men, women, and children.

EM: Were you aware this was going to happen?

McNamara: Well, I was part of a mechanism that in a sense recommended it. I analyzed bombing operations, and how to make them more efficient. i.e. Not more efficient in the sense of killing more, but more efficient in weakening the adversary.

I wrote one report analyzing the efficiency of the B—29 operations. The B—29 could get above the fighter aircraft and above the air defense, so the loss rate would be much less. The problem was the accuracy was also much less.

Now I don't want to suggest that it was my report that led to, I'll call it, the firebombing. It isn't that I'm trying to absolve myself of blame. I don't want to suggest that it was I who put in LeMay's mind that his operations were totally inefficient and had to be drastically changed. But, anyhow, that's what he did. He took the B—29s down to 5,000 feet and he decided to bomb with firebombs.

I participated in the interrogation of the B—29 bomber crews that came back that night. A room full of crewmen and intelligence interrogators. A captain got up, a young captain said: "Goddammit, I'd like to know who the son of a bitch was that took this magnificent airplane, designed to bomb from 23,000 feet and he took it down to 5,000 feet and I lost my wingman. He was shot and killed."

LeMay spoke in monosyllables. I never heard him say more than two words in sequence. It was basically "Yes," "No," "Yup," or "The hell with it." That was all he said. And LeMay was totally intolerant of criticism. He never engaged in discussion with anybody.

He stood up. "Why are we here? Why are we here? You lost your wingman; it hurts me as much as it does you. I sent him there. And I've been there, I know what it is. But, you lost one wingman, and we destroyed Tokyo."

50 square miles of Tokyo were burned. Tokyo was a wooden city, and when we dropped these firebombs, it just burned it.

Lesson #5: Proportionality should be a guideline in war.

EM: The choice of incendiary bombs, where did that come from?

McNamara: I think the issue is not so much incendiary bombs. I think the issue is: in order to win a war should you kill 100,000 people in one night, by firebombing or any other way? LeMay's answer would be clearly "Yes."

"McNamara, do you mean to say that instead of killing 100,000, burning to death 100,000 Japanese civilians in that one night, we should have burned to death a lesser number or none? And then had our soldiers cross the beaches in Tokyo and been slaughtered in the tens of thousands? Is that what you're proposing? Is that moral? Is that wise?"

Why was it necessary to drop the nuclear bomb if LeMay was burning up Japan? And he went on from Tokyo to firebomb other cities, 58% of Yokohama. Yokohama is roughly the size of Cleveland. 58% of Cleveland destroyed. Tokyo is roughly the size of New York. 51% percent of New York destroyed. 99% of the equivalent of Chattanooga, which was Toyama. 40% of the equivalent of Los Angeles, which was Nagoya. This was all done before the dropping of the nuclear bomb, which by the way was dropped by LeMay's command.

Proportionality should be a guideline in war. Killing 50% to 90% of the people of 67 Japanese cities and then bombing them with two nuclear bombs is not proportional, in the minds of some people, to the objectives we were trying to achieve.
I don’t fault Truman for dropping the nuclear bomb. The U.S.—Japanese War was one of the most brutal wars in all of human history—kamikaze pilots, suicide, unbelievable. What one can criticize is that the human race prior to that time and today has not really grappled with what are, I’ll call it, “the rules of war.” Was there a rule then that said you shouldn’t bomb, shouldn’t kill, shouldn’t burn to death 100,000 civilians in one night?

LeMay said, “If we’d lost the war, we’d all have been prosecuted as war criminals.” And I think he’s right. He, and I’d say I, were behaving as war criminals. LeMay recognized that what he was doing would be thought immoral if his side had lost. But what makes it immoral if you lose and not immoral if you win?

March 2, 1964

Lyndon B. Johnson: I want you to dictate to me a memorandum of a couple of pages. Four letter words and short sentences on the situation in Vietnam, the “Vietnam Picture.” This morning Senator Scott said that “The war which we can neither win, lose, nor drop is evidence of an instability of ideas. A floating series of judgments, our policy of nervous conciliation, which is extremely disturbing.” Do you think it’s a mistake to explain about Vietnam and what we’re faced with?

McNamara: Well, I do think, Mr. President, it would be wise for you to say as little as possible. The frank answer is we don’t know what is going on out there. The signs I see coming through the cables are disturbing signs. It is a very uncertain period.

March 10, 1964

Johnson: We need somebody over there that can get us some better plans than we’ve got. What I want is somebody that can lay up some plans to trap these guys and whup the hell out of them. Kill some of them, that’s what I want to do.

McNamara: I’ll try and bring something back that will meet that objective.

Johnson: Okay, Bob.

EM: At some point, we have to approach Vietnam. And I want to know how you can best set that up for me?

McNamara: Yeah, well, that’s a hard, hard question. I think we have to approach it in the context of the Cold War. But first, I’ll have to talk about Ford. I’ll have to go back to the end of the war.

1945

I had a terrible headache so Marg drove me in to the Air Force regional hospital. A week later Marg came in — many of the same symptoms. It’s hard to believe and I don’t think I’ve ever heard of another case where two individuals, husband and wife, came down essentially at the same time with polio. We were both in the hospital with on VJ day.

I had to pay the bills and they were very heavy. And a friend of mine said, “We’re going to find a corporation in America that needs the advice and capabilities of this extraordinary group of people I’m going to bring together and you’ve got to be a part of it.” I said, “The hell with it. I’m not going to be a part of it. I’m going back to Harvard. That’s what Marg and I want to do. I’m going to spend my life there.”

He said, “Look, Bob, you can’t pay Marg’s hospital bills, you’re crazy as hell.” He said, “By the way the company that most needs our help in all the U.S. is Ford.” Well, I said, “How’d you learn that?” He said, “Oh, I read in article in Life Magazine.”

Of the top thousand executives at Ford Motor Company, I don’t believe there were ten college graduates, and Henry Ford II needed help. They were gonna give us tests. Two