

A Meeting with the Devil: Penetrating *The Fog of War*

When you go to a horror film, you sit down, get the wind scared out of you, and then go back to reality.

But *The Fog of War*, the latest film from Errol Morris, is a documentary. You sit down and get the wind scared of you, but you can't go back to reality—because the film is reality, and it instills a simultaneous revilement of and pathos for the human race, and an anticipatory horror that can never go away.

War is the bleakest, ugliest, most rancid part of human nature; yet it is part of us, and no matter how much we hate it, no matter how much damage it does, no matter how much we love life, and no matter how many tears we shed over the destruction we inflict, we continue to fight. History bears this out. The need to destroy the other is a built-in flaw in our species, and it may prove to be our fatal flaw. One day the whole globe might be littered with human ash, and the few left alive, though heavily radiated, might gather to erect one final monument: a giant tombstone, with the chilling, chiseled epitaph, “Man: The Destroyer.”

I would hate for things to end this way, with destruction as the defining mark of our species, because I know we have a lot of good in us, too. Zoroastrians depict the struggle between good and evil as a constant metaphysical battle between the spirit of good, Ahura Mazda, and the spirit of evil, Ahriman. The forces are balanced perfectly, like two arm-wrestlers locked in an eternal match. In the end, as in most religions, good is supposed to triumph over evil in a spectacular victory. It's a wonderfully exciting and optimistic metaphor for the human condition.

In reality, we may not have reason to be so optimistic. With the march of technology, evil has become so advanced that the push of a single red button could set off a war of unprecedented destruction, where the greater part of the human race and all of what we now know as civilization could, in a matter of days, be obliterated.

That's not fair. The devil isn't playing by the rules. Where, I ask, is the green button, Ahura Mazda's button, that would reverse all the damage and make us all healthy and prosperous?

There is no green button.

The *Fog of War*, Errol Morris's latest documentary, presents us as a species on the verge of extinction. Robert McNamara, an 87-year-old man who spent the prime of his life engineering death for the US military, reviews his career and presents us with what he's learned in eleven, easy-to-follow lessons.

But instead of encouraging us and guiding us toward a benevolent future, these lessons are unsettling and upsetting. "Humans inevitably make mistakes;" "Rationality cannot save us;" "Belief and seeing are often both wrong" ...all this with a nuclear bomb sparkling in the middle spells doom.

McNamara's implicit forecast for humanity, accompanied by Philip Glass's painfully conscious soundtrack, is that we are marching toward a grim, dreadful, total end. A catastrophic, nightmare end, with blinding white flashes, burning skies, and waves of death rippling across the land. And like a Greek tragedy, the film suggests there's not a damn thing we can do about it.

This news isn't particularly heartening, especially as Dr. A. Q. Khan, founder of the Pakistani nuclear weapons program, recently confessed to selling nuclear secrets to the volatile nations Iran, Libya, and North Korea. Mohamed el-Baradei, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), said Khan's leak was just the "tip of the iceberg" in black-market nuclear proliferation.

No civilization that has the intelligence to build the technology to destroy itself should have the stupidity to use it. But man, the combustible mixture of opposites, a little less than the angels and a little more than the beasts, may finally prove to be a creation too internally contradicted to last.

It's easy to fear and hate and blame others for the mess we're in. But let's be honest. Who is the devil? Who is the boogeyman, the Ahriman, that

comes to haunt you in the dark? Not war; not Robert McNamara; not Dr.
A. Q. Khan.

The devil, my friends, is you.

Alan August