

## Empathy Invaluable in Times of Conflict

“Empathize with your enemy.” This is **Lesson 1** in the award-winning documentary, *The Fog of War: 11 Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*, directed by Errol Morris. The 11 lessons are culled by Morris from McNamara’s statements during 20 hours of interviewing McNamara and learning his roles in and perspectives of World War II, the [Cuban Missile Crisis](#), and the Vietnam War. Other lessons are related to **Lesson 1**:

- **Lesson 2:** Rationality will not save us.
- **Lesson 3:** There’s something beyond one’s self.
- **Lesson 7:** Belief and seeing are both often wrong.
- **Lesson 8:** Be prepared to reexamine your reasoning.

One of the film’s most profound and hair-raising moments is hearing how close [John F. Kennedy](#), [Nikita Khrushchev](#), and [Fidel Castro](#) (all “rationale” leaders provided with top-notch information by their respective intelligence agencies) came to ini-



tiating the conflict of all conflicts, nuclear war.

It was Llewellyn E. “Tommy” Thompson, someone frequently lost in the retelling of this awful moment in history, who was key in helping avoid nuclear catastrophe. As former ambassador to the then Soviet Union, Thompson and his wife had lived with Nikita Khrushchev and his wife. He could empathize with Khrushchev, get into his skin, understand from where Khrushchev was coming; Thompson knew that Khrushchev wanted to avoid war and be strong in his standing up to the United States.

On October 27, 1962, when the world stood on the brink of war, one of the most dangerous days in recorded history, there was a life-saving moment; Thompson had the courage to tell Kennedy, who did not think that negotiations would work: “I don’t agree, Mr. President.” Kennedy had what it takes to listen to and accept Thompson’s heart knowledge of the situation. A way was found to save face for all involved

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How much heart knowledge do we have?

and nuclear catastrophe was avoided, by a hair’s breath, according to McNamara!

In the everyday conflicts and wars that are part of our lives, we do not face ones that have such potential impact on the well-being of humankind. However, how we respond in our everyday ways to conflicts helps build a peaceful or not-so-peaceful world.

- ◆ How much empathy do we have with the ones with whom we are in conflict?
- ◆ How much heart knowledge do we have?
- ◆ How much do we put ourselves into their skin?
- ◆ How much do we see from their perspective?
- ◆ How do we respond when someone tells us that we are wrong?
- ◆ Which guides our perspectives and decision-making more: rationality or empathy?

How we answer these questions, individually and communally, has much to do with how we shape our lives, as well as the future of our world.