Letter from the Director
Thea Harvey

One of my favorite quotes is from Walt Whitman, “Do I contradict myself? Very well I contradict myself. I am large. I contain multitudes.” It reminds me that humans are complex and multilayered, that even if a person presents one aspect I find challenging, perhaps there is another that I can connect with. I enjoy that complexity.

After the death of Robert McNamara last spring I read the articles and obituaries, many of which focused on his role as “the architect of Vietnam.” I found them a one-sided dismissal of his transforming the World Bank to focus on poverty reduction, of his passionate nuclear disarmament work which led to his becoming a trustee of this organization. We decided to ask a few of our members to reflect on McNamara, to explore various aspects of his life and legacy.

*The Economist*'s obituary observes, “Quantification was a word Robert McNamara loved. Numbers could express almost any human activity... Things you could count, he said, you ought to count.” Several of the articles I read mentioned his methodical mind, his technocratic managerial style. He is famous for instituting systems analysis as a basis for making key decisions on force requirements at the Pentagon: 'systems' indicates that every decision should be considered in as broad a context as necessary; 'analysis' emphasizes the need to reduce a complex problem to its component parts for better understanding. Systems analysis takes a complex problem and sorts out the tangle of significant factors so that each can be studied by the method most appropriate to it.

The science of economics has been described to me the same way - breaking down the complexities until each element can be studied. Most of the articles I read after McNamara’s death blamed the debacle in Vietnam on this focus on this decision to reduce every problem to numbers; as Richard Parker puts it in his piece in this issue, using “prodigious calculating skills to optimize... killing effects.”

A few years ago the November 2005 issue of *EPS Quarterly* explored “Modern Warfare.” Generals and war-planners have always argued that their new plan/ technology/ management style was going to save lives by being more efficient. *The Economist* and others seem to argue that McNamara was an advocate of this type of thinking: if we can just pin it down, then we can get in and get out quickly, and as few people as possible will get hurt. But the truth is that things are always more complex than our models can incorporate. Human relations are messy. *The Economist* obit concludes, “He was haunted by the thought that amid all the objective-setting and evaluating, the careful counting and the cost-benefit analysis, stood ordinary human beings. They behaved unpredictably.”

I am too young to remember the Vietnam era first hand, so I leave it to Richard Parker and James Galbraith to analyze elsewhere in this issue McNamara’s possible mistakes and regrets. What I do know for certain is that he spent the last 15 – 20 years of his life tirelessly and energetically campaigning for nuclear disarmament.

At the EPS dinner in his honor, he told of meeting some of the surviving key personnel from the Cuban Missile
Crisis. For the first time he had the opportunity to meet with some of his counter-parts from Russia and Cuba and discuss what had been in their minds during those days. He realized just how close we had come to nuclear war. In 2005 McNamara pursued this theme in his article *Apocalypse Soon*. He wrote, “In conventional war, mistakes cost lives, sometimes thousands of lives. However, if mistakes were to affect decisions relating to the use of nuclear forces, there would be no learning curve. They would result in the destruction of nations. The indefinite combination of human fallibility and nuclear weapons carries a very high risk.”

Robert McNamara began his career as an economics professor at Harvard and ended it as a vigorous peace and disarmament activist. As such, he was an admirable trustee for our organization. I do not seek to erase or excuse the mistakes of the Vietnam War. After all, I have spent the past 8 years fighting against two wars that I find horribly mistaken and tragically destructive. I think we might, however, use the life of Robert McNamara as a cautionary tale – reminding us that there are always joys and sorrows behind the numbers, and of the tremendous potential we humans have for error, growth, and change.