From the Crucible of Experience
Jonathan Granoff

Since the July 6 passing of Robert S. McNamara, torrents of articles have been written by those who remember him scathingly as the architect of the Vietnam War, and the years of failed policies resulting in hundreds of thousands of deaths. They dismiss his many admissions of guilt and remorse and, consequently, his invaluable later work as one of the most effective advocates for nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation, arguably the most important issue we face today.

As President of the Global Security Institute, I had worked for years with this extraordinary man whose career engaged him as President of the Ford Motor Company and later the World Bank and US Secretary of Defense. His commitment to eliminate nuclear weapons was informed by knowing all too well several important truths: humans are fallible, civilization was saved by “good luck” in the Cuban Missile crisis, nuclear weapons — if they continue to exist — will eventually be used by accident or foolish design, and nuclear weapons are devastating in their destructive capacity beyond human imagination.

I am grateful to have had the privilege of working with him and becoming his friend. Perhaps the most profound lesson I learned from him was that a person can continue to learn and grow at any age.

One evening around midnight I received a call from him. He inquired whether it was okay to use a footnote from a law review article I had written\(^1\) in his analysis of the need for moral compass points in international policies. This was to be a major theme in his book *Wilson’s Ghost* and a critical point he had learned in the crucible of experience. As we discussed the universality of the Golden Rule, I realized that he was investigating this profound moral pillar with the intensity and openness of a youthful student. Moreover, he evaluated his own conduct and that of our nation in relation to it.

He wrote that book to address two questions: “Why, in essence, did 160 million people die in violent conflict in the 20th Century? What must be done to prevent the 21st Century from becoming as lethal as — or worse than — the 20th?” I strongly recommend this book to anyone serious about world peace and security.

His forceful opposition to nuclear weapons, perhaps most eloquently stated in his 2005 *Foreign Policy* article\(^2\), constituted one of the most effective calls for nuclear abolition. Long before the groundbreaking *Wall Street Journal* op/eds (January 15, 2008 and January 4, 2007) by Schultz, Nunn, Kissinger and Perry,\(^3\) Robert McNamara demonstrated that even the most visible cold warrior can understand that nuclear weapons in the 21st Century pose more of a problem than any problem they seek to solve, and that to favor nuclear abolition is to be neither naive nor anti-American.

Beyond our shared work on nuclear disarmament, Mr. McNamara and I collaborated on other issues as well. Our work together to promote the International Criminal Court, for example, in part resulted in his influential *New York Times* op/ed\(^4\) co-authored with Benjamin Ferencz.
While he was Secretary of Defense, to me he represented the failed policies that led to so much unnecessary suffering in the war in Vietnam. As a youth I carried so much venom for him. As I came to know what a good and caring man he was, I realized how foolish and arrogant I had been to judge his person thusly and how much good he actually had done in his life. One could make a good argument that during the Cuban Missile Crisis he was instrumental in saving civilization. But more importantly I came to realize that a person with sincerity can learn and grow. I also learned from working with him while he was in his eighties how fully committed he was to making the world a safer place and how willing he was to expend his time, his energy, his very health in this endeavor.

In the Epilogue of Wilson’s Ghost, he expressed his affection for an Archibald MacLeish poem “The Young Dead Soldiers:” They say: Our deaths are not ours; they are yours; they will mean what you make them.
They say: Whether our lives and our deaths were for peace and a new hope or for nothing we cannot say; it is you who must say this.
They say: We leave you our deaths. Give them their meaning…

One should not be sad about a person passing at 93 but we will surely miss him.

He helped amplify the Global Security Institute's advocacy for nuclear disarmament countless times. We remain grateful to have walked with him. May God bless his soul with infinite peace.

Endnotes:

Jonathan Granoff is an author, attorney, and international peace activist. He is the current president of the Global Security Institute, a nonprofit organization committed to the elimination of nuclear weapons. He also serves as the Co-Chair of the American Bar Association's Committee on Arms Control and National Security, and as the Vice President of the NGO Committee on Disarmament, Peace, and Security at the UN.