

Note: This show periodically replaces their ad breaks with new promotional clips. Because of this, both the transcription for the clips and the timestamps after them may be inaccurate at the time of viewing this transcript.

00:00:00	Music	Music	Slow, dramatic, melancholy orchestral arrangement plays in background of dialogue.
00:00:04	Ben Harrison	Host	Vietnam films were a new breed of war film, and I'm not just talking about the films specifically about Vietnam. The stakes of WWII were so high and the Greater Generation's disposition as a people so specifically stoic that the films they themselves made about their war were imbued with a reverence. These were important stories told about a good war; a war in which 73 million people died and that touched the lives of almost everyone on earth. Even in corny adventure films about WWII, the necessity of the war wasn't one of the questions the filmmakers set out to ask. But by the time the Vietnam War kicked off, some of the luster had worn off of telling war stories. That's why so many of the WWII films we've watched from the late '60s onward feel like they're trying to relitigate things. They're grappling with issues presented by war for their contemporary audiences in the safe confines of a war that didn't make us wonder... are we the baddies? The American self-image—at least for the subset of Americans whose socioeconomic, religious, and ethnic identities have traditionally been pandered to for our culture—has always been one of being “the good guys.” We are the country that was founded by the guys that landed here and had a nice Thanksgiving dinner with the Indians, but then we saw the injustice of tea taxes and we dumped the tea in the harbor and have been fighting injustice ever since. Like that time we fought to defeat slavery. Or that time we came to the rescue, twice, in two back-to-back world wars.
00:01:36	Ben	Host	The long arc of history bends towards justice and it's hard to fight for justice, but we always do it! 'Cause goshdarnit, we're the good guys. You get the sense that that's not just a majority opinion, but a kind of orthodoxy among a certain kind of older American. And frankly, if you lived through The Great War, the Great Depression, and The Great War 2: The Secret of the Ooze, you might never have encountered a challenge to that assumption. Even if you were a genius and a once-in-a-lifetime political phenom like Lyndon Baines Johnson. The question “are we the baddies?” was almost incompatible with the version of the OS he was running on. The other thing that changed about films in the Vietnam era? Was how <u>rugged</u> they got. This reached its apotheosis later when Oliver Stone started to polemicize the war, but you could see it as early as the Johnson years. A Vietnam-era film is often sweaty, bloody, and brutal. But today's film takes an entirely different approach. It tells the story of the war from the perspective of the White House and the decisionmakers who committed us to the quagmire. Every choice was made honestly and every argument was made in good faith by members of the Greatest Generation, who imagined themselves to be “the good guys.” Today we get a 2002 John Frankenheimer film exploring how “the good guys” could have broken so bad. “I know they're losing. I don't need a Phi Beta Kappa to know they're losing! Anyone smart enough to pour piss out of a boot knows they're losing!” Today on <i>Friendly Fire—Path to War!</i>

[Music swells, then transitions into theme song.]

00:03:09	Music	Music	<p>“War” off the album <i>War & Peace</i> by Edwin Starr. Impassioned, intense funk.</p> <p><i>War!</i> <i>Huh!</i> <i>Yeah!</i> <i>What is it good for?!</i> <i>Absolutely—</i> <i>—nothing!</i> <i>Uh-huh!</i></p> <p><i>War!</i> <i>Huh!</i> <i>Yeah!</i> <i>What is it good for?!</i> <i>Absolutely—</i> <i>—nothing!</i></p> <p><i>Say it again, y’all!</i></p> <p><i>War!</i></p>
00:03:26	Ben	Host	<p><i>[Song fades down and plays quietly as the hosts speak.]</i> Welcome to <i>Friendly Fire</i>, the war movie podcast that’s been tossed about more than a dollar whore at a port of call. I’m Ben Harrison.</p>
00:03:33	Adam	Host	<p>I’m Adam Pranica.</p>
00:03:35	John Roderick	Host	<p>And I’m John Roderick.</p>
00:03:37	Adam	Host	<p>Pretty soapy language there!</p>
00:03:38	Ben	Host	<p>You’re not supposed to say that word anymore, but it’s a quote from the film. It’s not <u>my</u> word.</p>
00:03:44	John	Host	<p>You’re not supposed to say “whore” anymore?</p>
00:03:46	Ben	Host	<p>Yeah. I think you’re supposed to say “a sex worker that’s priced to move.”</p>
00:03:50	John	Host	<p><i>[Adam laughs.]</i> <i>[Through laughter]</i> There’s so many—so many great poems and sailors’ ditties that are cancelled.</p>
00:03:58	Adam	Host	<p><i>[Ben laughs.]</i> Yeah. None of ‘em are gonna rhyme anymore!</p> <p><i>[Ben laughs.]</i></p> <p>John, you’re the song writer. What rhymes with “sex worker”?</p>
00:04:04	John	Host	<p><i>[All laugh.]</i> Uh, “Herp-derper?”</p>
00:04:09	Adam	Host	<p>Right. There ya go. That’s it! That’s the only thing.</p>
00:04:11	John	Host	<p>That’s all you got, yeah.</p>
00:04:14	Adam	Host	<p>Yeah.</p>
00:04:15	Ben	Host	<p>This movie definitely starts with a scene that is designed to impress you with the cast that it got together?</p>
00:04:22	John	Host	<p>Mm. Yeah.</p>

00:04:24	Ben	Host	Like, I think a lot of these HBO films are like, “Alright. We don’t have the budget to, y’know, make our own Vietnam footage. So we’ll use stock footage of that. <u>But</u> what we do have is a great big ballroom that we smoked up and put, like, 43 That Guys in tuxedos to walk around in.”
			<i>[John laughs.]</i>
00:04:43	Adam	Host	It really sets the tone!
00:04:44	John	Host	It really does.
00:04:45	Ben	Host	It’s amazing!
00:04:46	John	Host	It really does.
00:04:48	Ben	Host	Michael Gambon was a great LBJ in my opinion!
00:04:50	Adam	Host	Totally.
00:04:51	Clip	Clip	Speaker: “What’s it gonna get to get Ho Chi Minh to quit? That’s all that I wanna know.”
00:04:54	John	Host	The accent <u>never</u> came all the way there, but by hour two of the movie I was invested in him as LBJ? But LBJ’s way of speaking was just <u>so</u> unique and Gambon—he just—he would slide into British or he’d—y’know, he just... that’s gotta be the hardest accent. West Texas? It’s just gotta be.
00:05:20	Ben	Host	Actually, John, that smashes right into the IMDB goof that I found for this episode. A pedant noticed that Lyndon B. Johnson was a native of Texas; however, Michael Gambon’s native British accent occasionally slips in, particularly in the pronunciation of some words—“taught, fought, should, or heart”—
			<i>[Sound of telegraph beeps playing in background.]</i>
			—and the use of some terms that would be unfamiliar to an American, such as gobbledygook.
00:05:47	John	Host	What?!
00:05:48	Ben	Host	Which is an <u>insane</u> thing for an internet pedant to write, because “gobbledygook” derives from United States slang.
00:05:57	John	Host	It was coined by a Texas congressman!
00:06:01	Ben	Host	Texas politician Maury Maverick! The guy that gave us the word “Maverick!” He also gave us the word “gobbledygook!”
00:06:07	Adam	Host	Downvote this pedant!
			<i>[John laughs.]</i>
00:06:11	Ben	Host	Mark it as inappropriate.
00:06:14	Adam	Host	“Did not find this interesting.” I was really impressed with how much work a haircut and the right glasses do in making a person look like another person. And later on in the film, Lyndon Johnson’s glasses, I thought, did a <u>ton</u> of the heavy lifting. Glasses and posture?
00:06:31	Ben	Host	And Brylcreem.
00:06:32	Clip	Clip	Speaker: That’s a hell of a combination.
00:06:34	Adam	Host	Yeah. It feels like the film got more believably Lyndon Johnson as it went.
00:06:40	Ben	Host	Yeah. I thought that McNamara was also, like, same exact list of things. Right? Like the slicked-back hair. The right glasses. And suddenly Alec Baldwin <i>[through laughter]</i> looks like McNamara.
00:06:55	Adam	Host	Hey! If you lived in the ‘60s and you were an adult man, did you take a shower before bed every night? Or did you go to bed with your greased-up hair on the pillow every night?

00:07:06 Ben Host You'd do like a hairnet! Like George Clooney in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

00:07:12 John Host *[John laughs.]*
It's funny, Adam, that you ask that. Because taking a shower every day... only became a thing that people did in the '80s. And in a lot of cases, people took a shower I think... pretty commonly once a week.

00:07:31 Ben Host What?!

00:07:32 John Host Because if you took a shower more often than that you had to redo all your hair!

00:07:36 Adam Host So the benefit of this hairstyle is that you do it once? You set it and forget it?

[Ben laughs.]

00:07:43 John Host For the rest of the week?
You put that stuff in there and then all you need to do is run a comb through it. But this was true of lady hair, too. Like, you'd get your hair done and then you'd put it up at night and then you'd do it—then you'd wash it at the end of the week and you'd get it done again.

00:07:58 Adam Host Would you stick your neck on a foam roller to keep it up off of the pillow? I just don't understand how you don't wake up with crazy-ass hair every morning.

00:08:07 Crosstalk Crosstalk **John:** Yeah, well.

00:08:09 Adam Host **Adam:** And a pillow that just looks like an atrocity.
That looks like a used diaper.

00:08:13 Ben Host You still got the stuff in the hair but you just pull a comb through it.

00:08:15 Crosstalk Crosstalk **Adam:** Wow.

00:08:16 John Host **John:** Yeah. You'd pull a comb through it.
And this is also probably during a time when—although you only showered once a week—you changed your pillowcases every so often. Unlike today, where you wash your hair every day but you change your pillowcases once a month.

00:08:28 Ben Host This is back when they called it “bed clothes”?

00:08:32 John Host *[All laugh.]*
I remember in the '80s when I started to—when I was going through puberty and started to take a shower every day and my mom was like, incredulous.

[Multiple people laugh.]

00:08:52 Adam Host “You're taking another shower?” And I'm like, “Yeah, today's shower.” And she's like, “You kids today. With your crazy ways.”

00:08:54 John Host “What's that sound I keep hearing while you're in the shower?”

00:08:55 Adam Host Well.

00:08:59 John Host “That doesn't sound like showering to me!”
It was my motorized U-boat.

[Multiple people laugh.]

00:09:03 Crosstalk Crosstalk **John:** Brrrrr. Dive! Dive! Dive!

00:09:06 Adam Host **Adam:** That—that—that—
—bored torpedo tube in that toy sure got a lot of action in those days.

00:09:10 John Host *[Ben laughs.]*
It was a medium-sized U-boat. Big enough for the tub. Not big enough for anything weird. It's interesting—this movie is kind of a... a reply movie to the documentary *The Fog of War*.

00:09:27 Ben Host I think this movie came out right before *Fog of War*, actually.

00:09:31 John Host Oh did it? Really?

00:09:32 Ben Host Yeah.

00:09:33 John Host Oh.

00:09:34 Ben Host Yeah. I think this is 2002 and *Fog of War* came out in 2003.

00:09:37 John Host Oh, no kidding! Wow!

00:09:39 Ben Host I felt like they were speaking to each other for sure. Like, you're not alone having picked up on that. Because that whole arc with McNamara being, like, super hawkish and then like—it almost feels like this movie is making the case that he had his will broken? To some extent? Like, seeing the protests day after day and getting less and less sure of himself as his strategies just didn't pan out the way his calculations said that they would? Like... McNamara being the Secretary of Defense that—unlike Donald Rumsfeld—sort of repented for what he did.

00:10:18 Adam Host It's been a long time since I've seen *Fog of War*. But it does make me wanna go back and watch it again. If it were a reply to this film... I really felt like *Path of War* presented both LBJ and McNamara as sympathetic figures! Oddly. Like... McNamara couldn't get out of the way of his nature as... as an analyst. First. And everything else that a human being is, second.

[Ben laughs.]

And honestly, like, that sounds super cutting; but I felt sorry for him through much of the film because he just couldn't... he didn't seem like he had all of the qualities that a— *[Laughs.]* That a person has. He felt like something was missing to him and I feel like the reasons we kept cutting to his relationship with his wife was a way to further emphasize that. Like, he was so determined to see the thing through analytically that there was no room for emotion. And LBJ was almost exactly the opposite. He was hyper-emotional, and he couldn't go the other direction.

00:11:32 Ben Host This, as much as anything, is a movie that's about what a bad situation it would be to have a petty and vain person in the Oval Office.

00:11:40 Adam Host Right. Well, if McNamara felt like he needed to respond to this film it just makes me wonder in what way... he attempted to do that. Like, was his position "I actually did have feelings and I felt very bad about all of the things I was complicit in"? Or—

00:11:58 Ben Host Yeah.

00:11:59 Adam Host Or "You just don't understand what that job is, man. And I'm here to tell you." Like, I wish I had seen that film more recently. To say—it makes me wanna see it. For sure.

00:12:09 Ben Host I mean, I remember that I came away from *Fog of War* pretty surprised at how much regret McNamara expressed. And how like toward the end of his life, he came to understand how many—at how many points he'd completely misunderstood what the North

Vietnamese were doing? And I think it's sort of shown in this movie, too. That he and the Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff both keep just, like, they cannot get out of their head the idea that like, "Oh, like if we like destroy their fuel supply, that will completely eliminate their ability to keep prosecuting this war." Because their thinking of the North Vietnamese as being conventional army. And so all of their calculations are based on a faulty assumption, and all of the like things that they see the Vietnamese doing they can trace back to motivations of a conventional army that aren't the actual motivations of what they're doing.

00:13:12 Adam Host

A post-Vietnam McNamara is such an interesting character. Like, did you guys read that someone attempted to kill him by throwing him off of a ferry and he didn't press charges against the guy because he was like, "Yeah. I totally understand where he was coming from."

[Ben laughs.]

00:13:28 Ben Host

"I would throw me off a ferry, too."

00:13:30 Adam Host

It's incredible! He lived for a long time! Afterward. And he had to live with his decisions publicly.

00:13:37 Clip Clip

Speaker: "Uh, no, sir. I'm afraid we did lose one plane."

00:13:41 Ben Host

This movie was hard to watch. It's really long. It's not super compelling. Like, it's not like a fun two hours and 45 minutes. But—

00:13:48 Adam Host

This is a kind of movie, though, right? Like—I think for its kind I thought it was great.

00:13:54 Ben Host

It's a descent into, I would say?

[John laughs.]

And that's like one of my least favorite genres. But I think that the... fact that it's like historical is also infuriating. Because we're watching LBJ just like bang himself against the hallways in the white house. Like... not wanting to do this stuff and yet feeling compelled to do it and never having the moral courage to be like, "Alright. This is—we've taken this way too far and we need to like shut it down and stop." That fucking really happened! Like, we don't have good social programs in this country. We have dogshit education. We have a dogshit social safety net. Because of these decisions! And people that thought that they could like continue to make this kind of decisions in administrations that followed this!

00:14:44 John Host

Yeah. The movie lets LBJ off the hook. A lot more than... I think history will. In the sense that it makes LBJ feel like a little bit of a patsy. Or... it really plays up the degree to which these decisions were being recommended to him by his brainy cohort and he's just like, "Well, I wanna get back to civil rights, but... y'know, my advisors keep pushing me into war." I mean, LBJ was an incredibly energetic president? And he wanted to do everything and his Great Society programs in a lot of ways do form the backbone of what we think of as the social services of today? Like, without LBJ there wouldn't be... a lot—I mean, the whole concept of public housing or whatever. I mean, y'know, there were a lot of things that came about as a result of LBJ's interest in social services, civil rights. He was trying to build a great society. But he didn't get pulled into Vietnam by McNamara. Y'know. And this movie kind of shows this relationship as like... McNamara being a super hawk and LBJ being

like, “What? Really? Can’t we just—can’t I get back to my civil rights legislation?”

[Ben laughs.]

00:16:17 Ben Host It really pits like ‘Nam versus the Voting Rights Act. Which do you wanna do? You have to pick.

00:16:24 John Host But McNamara was not a super hawk. You know, McNamara was one of the guys in the room during the Cuban Missile Crisis and was like—in a lot of ways, we owe our civilization to like a handful of people there. And he was one of ‘em! Right? One of the level heads! And McNamara was not a warmon—I mean, wait a minute. Let me just pull that statement back.

[Ben laughs.]

Y’know, watching this was maybe the first time in my life that I had, briefly, the thought flitted through my mind, like, “God. Vietnam. Who gives a shit anymore?” And it—

[Ben laughs.]

00:17:11 Adam Host It like—startled me to have the thought. Because Vietnam has been at the center of my life—I mean, in terms of politics. Like—I love that you edited yourself to say that.

[Multiple people laugh.]

00:17:17 John Host But in a way, like, this movie—the boringness of it or whatever—like, to a Boomer or an old generation Xer, we know all these characters! We know this all. And watching this is just like... we’ve just heard all these terms. We’ve watched all this play out in so many conversations and so many documentaries and newspaper editorials. Like, our whole lives.

00:17:45 Clip Clip **Speaker:** But we won’t get out, Bob! We will double our bets and get massacred in the rice paddies!

00:17:51 John Host We watch all these people go home at night and put on their bedclothes. Or whatever.

[Ben laughs.]

And so, y’know, this is supposed to—for people like me—be like a tantalizing glimpse into the inner chambers of stuff that’s, y’know, this is just *Washington Post* fodder. This—all this stuff. Y’know, LBJ and McNamara both had bigger personalities, if that’s possible to imagine, than Gambon and Baldwin. Like, neither of them got anywhere close to communicating just the charisma? The arrogance? The insanity, the... the self-confidence.

00:18:39 Adam Host Do you think the casting of Baldwin as McNamara was a choice about making McNamara more sympathetic? Because there’s a charisma to Baldwin that he just has, inherently, in any role. That I think pulls you in! There’s a gravity to him that almost makes the point that we should root for him. Because we’re made to root for Alec Baldwin characters in movies. And we’ve been trained to do that for a decade leading up to this.

00:19:08 John Host And that—but that gravity that he has... what it doesn’t communicate—like, I don’t know how much time you guys have spent around people that are super-duper confident that they’re the

00:19:26	Adam	Host	<p>smartest person in the room? I know that you have spent some amount of time with people like that? I can't think of anyone.</p> <p><i>[Ben laughs.]</i></p> <p>Who I would describe that way. We should do a show with one of those guys, Ben!</p>
00:19:34	John	Host	<p><i>[Through laughter]</i> Alright, alright, alright. Where would we find such a person, though?</p> <p><i>[Adam laughs.]</i></p> <p>But people that are <u>really</u> like that, they have a—</p> <p><i>[Multiple people laugh.]</i></p> <p>Yeah.</p> <p>They have a sense of humor. McNamara had less doubt than Alec Baldwin is communicating with his gravity. Like, McNamara had a big smile on his face most of his life. Because everything worked out for McNamara and he had the numbers to prove it! And he... was making decisions that were based on data analysis and so—and he loved to sit and argue with you. But it wasn't—and there are few moments like that where you get the sense of McNamara just being like, "Oh, yeah, that was a great argument. Like, thanks for having that wonderful argument with me about—"</p>
00:19:36	Ben	Host	
00:19:39	John	Host	
00:19:44	Adam	Host	
00:19:47	John	Host	
00:20:26	Ben	Host	<p>"You really made it interesting on the other side! I mean, you were wrong, but it was very interesting to hear you say all that stuff and you seem very passionate."</p>
00:20:32	John	Host	<p>But that was one moment in the film, and we see a <u>lot</u> of... McNamara <u>agonizing</u>. And I think he <u>did</u> agonize, but he agonized in a different way. There was nothing <u>broody</u> about McNamara 'cause he was... <u>so</u>... and LBJ, too! Like, the thing that Gambon didn't communicate about LBJ was that LBJ went into every conversation feeling like he knew best. At least, I never got a sense of LBJ being so <u>fickle</u>. These are accurate—I mean, this is historical, right? And LBJ did lose... faith and eventually, like, the world came crashing down around him. But he—but LBJ made that world! Like, he went into Vietnam <u>full</u> of West Texas confidence that <u>he</u> was gonna prosecute this war. He wasn't like a dupe!</p>
00:21:36	Clip	Clip	<p>President Lyndon B. Johnson: <i>[With telephone static]</i> But see if you can't leave me about an inch from where the zipper—<i>[burps]</i> ends.</p>
00:21:42	Ben	Host	<p>One thing that really blew me away about this movie is how theoretical it all seems for these people? Like, they're just going around to different rooms with like nice white wood paneling and paintings from the <i>[through laughter]</i> Revolutionary era. And talking about like... y'know, Da Nang and Ho Chi Minh and all these like airstrips and stuff. Like, they're literally fighting the war on paper, just like, "Oh, like if, y'know, if we take this out but can manage to avoid hitting this school that's down the road then this, this, and this will happen because that's how this works." And like one thing that's really powerful about Gambon's performance is that he really seems to care about the outcome. And that is always something I wonder about when you're so far removed. When you don't—like, he goes to Vietnam eventually, but for most of the movie he's like never been there. He's never set foot there. He doesn't actually</p>

00:22:49 John Host have any like connection to anyone there. It's all just kind of like an abstract concept. But he seems to really, really care about like the, y'know, like, doing right by the people of South Vietnam. I mean, LBJ was the best politician in American history. And what the movie never made clear... it did show him really care about the school. But what it didn't show was him calculating the political consequences of a blown-up school being on the front page of the newspaper. And a lot of what LBJ was doing, I think, was saying, "How is this gonna play in the court of public opinion?" We mock Donald Trump for sitting and watching TV all day and taking, y'know, and tweeting about how he's being portrayed. But every politician at that level is super-duper conscious of the editorial pages. None of them want to see dead kids on the front page of the *Washington Post*. And we didn't see that in this performance. Gambon is portrayed as—or Gambon is portraying LBJ as, y'know, as concerned about the people. Early in the movie—as he's navigating the civil rights legislation—we see him portrayed as a canny politician. When he gets George Wallace in there and gets right in his face and manipulates him? And that's the LBJ that I know.

00:24:09 Adam Host *[Ben laughs.]*
Did you read about "the treatment"? Like, that's what he was known for. Was this sort of—how he could work someone politically. And there's like a physicality to it? And a hypnosis, almost, about it? That was legendary.

00:24:22 John Host Right in your physical space.

00:24:24 Adam Host Yeah. The way he moved a person physically in order to make himself dominant, I thought was really great! I could've used more scenes like that.

00:24:32 Ben Host I could've used more scenes where he was taking a dump and like giving some information to one of his aides.

00:24:38 John Host Well, you know, one of the famous stories of LBJ is that he had a really big dick. And he would intentionally go stand next to you—too close to you—at a urinal while he was talking politics with you?

[Multiple people laugh.]

Like, "Now, we gonna have to get this legislation passed!" And he would just pull out his fucking giant schlong?

[Multiple people laugh.]

And he would—he wasn't, like, being subtle about it. He'd be like, "Now take a look at this, boy! Now, you gonna need to just respect my dick!" Like, he was famous for it. Y'know? Like, he did that shit. Short reprise of theme song "War."

00:25:14 Music Transition
00:25:15 Promo Clip

Music: Gentle, upbeat piano music.

Helen Hong: Hey, J. Keith.

J. Keith van Straaten: Hey, Helen! Hey, you've got another true/false quiz for me?

Helen: Yep! Our trivia podcast *Go Fact Yourself* used to be in front a live audience.

J. Keith: True! Turns out that's not so safe anymore.

Helen: Correct! Next. Unfortunately this means we can no longer record the show.

J. Keith: False! The show still comes out every first and third Friday of the month.

Helen: Correct! Finally, we still have great celebrity guests answering trivia about things they love on every episode of *Go Fact Yourself*.

J. Keith: Definitely true.

Helen: And for bonus points, name some of them.

Music: Dramatic organ/piano music.

00:26:04 Promo Clip

[Background noise throughout: a howling wolf and cawing crow. April speaks in a sinister voice.]

April Wolfe: Hello there, ghouls and gals. It is I, April Wolfe. I'm here to take you through the twisty, sca-a-a-ry, heart-pounding world of genre cinema on the exhilarating program known as [Switchblade Sisters](#).

[Sinister echo on the title.]

The concept is simple: I invite a female filmmaker on each week, and we discuss their favorite genre film. Listen in closely to hear past guests, like *The Babadook* director Jennifer Kent, *Winter's Bone* director Debra Granik, and so many others every Thursday on [MaximumFun.org](#). Tune in! If you dare...

[Thunder booms, something growls over April as she cackles evilly, and then all sound abruptly cuts.]

April: *[Rapidly]* It's actually a very thought-provoking show that deeply explores the craft and philosophy behind the filmmaking process while also examining film through the lens of the female gaze.

So, like, you should listen.

[Same sinister echo effect] Switchblade Sisters!

00:26:50 Music Transition

Short reprise of theme song "War."

00:26:52 John Host

I think that Baldwin was cast partly because he really looks like McNamara when he does his hair.

00:26:59 Ben Host

I mean, he's definitely not a likeable character at the beginning of this movie. Part of that is that like we're bringing our knowledge of like how Vietnam went, so anybody that's like, "Let's go do this!" Is gonna be somewhat villainous at the beginning. But like, his—this character arc is definitely bending towards sympathetic in this film. But that's kind of a magic trick, right? 'Cause like, you shouldn't have to watch a man set himself on fire to catch yourself and realize that you've been fucking things up for *[through laughter]* two years?

00:27:36 Adam Host I mean, I felt like the message of that scene was how unemotional McNamara was at having witnessed it.

00:27:44 Ben Host He doesn't break down in the moment, but he's fixated on that spot for the rest of the film. It really affects him, I think.

00:27:52 Adam Host I think it's instructive about how he processes information and emotional things, though. That moment. Like, he does not absorb it the way many people would. Which is in horror. Or to recoil from it. But he observes it almost like a scientist would.

00:28:09 John Host The movie paints that as the turning point in his life, though.

00:28:13 Ben Host Yeah. I think it's really problematic scene, the way it's erected? Because Norman Morrison is made to look like a... like a crazy drifter?

00:28:22 John Host Yeah. He is.

00:28:23 Ben Host I think there is a case to be made that Norman Morrison was not in his right mind when he took a baby in a basket and stood outside the Pentagon and set himself on fire.

[John laughs.]

For sure. But he was also like a devout Quaker and he didn't do it just because he was like, y'know, "Fuck the world." He was devout in his cause and it was a political act and it was probably partly inspired by similar acts that had been performed by Buddhist monks in Vietnam. Like, to have him just show up, like, looking like a guy who's, y'know, at the end of his rope... I feel like kind of undercuts the power of the act that he—

00:29:11 Adam Host Ben, we just talked about this at the beginning of the episode. Everyone looked like this. No one was showering.

[Multiple people laugh.]

00:29:19 John Host We're watching these best and the brightest people with the—with absolutely the whole world at their disposal. Right? Johnson has won the election in '64 with the greatest majority of any president. And really controlled the world. Had tremendous support and mandate and power. And we watch it just... slip through his fingers and we watch ourselves fall into this intractable and unwinnable war that in a way you could say has been going on ever since. From '64 to the present, we've never fully understood the wars that we've been in. And we keep getting into these.

00:30:04 Ben Host Ball, like, keeps saying, like, "Bombing never wins the war." It's not that like they didn't have access to a worldview that contained their downfall. *[Laughs.]* Before they did this stuff.

00:30:18 John Host I mean, it's the story of the United States! Right? The way we won the American Revolution was the Minutemen. Like... didn't just line up and get mown down by the Redcoats. We fought guerilla war, to a certain extent. And it's evidence of an action bias? Where people in the military, given a choice between not doing anything and doing something, will always pick "do something"? Even if it's clear that what we should do at this moment is not do anything? But also at this point in history there's this incredible technology bias.

00:30:55 Clip Clip **Speaker:** I've always believed that the mind is the best weapon.

00:30:58 John Host We've built all this war-making equipment to fight a war with the Soviets. And we have all these bombers and all these fast jets and all this stuff. That we've made to counter this intercontinental threat and magic submarines and spies and... nukes and all this stuff. And so in looking at the problem of Vietnam, it's not just that they're

			fighting the last war. Which was a war that you could, maybe, make a case that strategic bombing, y'know, we at least flattened both Tokyo, Berlin, and 80 other cities in both countries.
00:31:39	Ben	Host	I mean, this movie is long enough that they even have that argument in this movie.
			<i>[John laughs.]</i>
00:31:44	John	Host	But what do you do if what you have is... B-52s?
00:31:49	Music	Music	Brief song clip from the B-52s.
00:31:51	John	Host	You use B-52s! Is the problem. And—
00:31:55	Ben	Host	They're fighting the last war and a future war that they're anticipating, but not the current war.
00:32:01	John	Host	They are not dealing with Vietnam. And you're absolutely right. I mean, Ball is such a great character in this movie and I think it's fairly accurate representation of his viewpoints throughout. Where he just keeps saying, like, " <i>Dien Bien Phu</i> . Did you guys not read the book? Like, this is not—to the Vietnamese this is not a... this is not the war that you think it is. And they will fight you forever." And just nobody in the room listens!
00:32:32	Adam	Host	I mean, if you're gonna cast a George Ball, Bruce McGill is just a great choice. I mean, Bruce McGill goes through every emotion in this movie. HE's really spectacular in it, I think. Ben, I think you mentioned earlier the problem of proximity, right? That no one was over there to really give those that made these decisions the perspective they needed. What they had instead was Westmoreland asking for more shit. And I thought that was a very damning depiction of how decisions were made. So remotely. Y'know? Like, here's a guy on the—well, I guess if he needs more B-52s we better give it to him! Give 'em to him, right? If he needs more troops, we're not gonna say no to Westmoreland, right?
00:33:22	Ben	Host	Well, and it's that "Death of 1,000 Cuts" thing because at the beginning they're like, y'know, <u>nobody</u> is talking about half a million troops. Like, that's—put that out of your mind because we are not gonna do this war with half a million troops. Like, that's just insane. And then by the end they're like, "Okay, we're probably gonna need like 750,000 troops and like, y'know, open up the bombing to everything. Everything's on the table now." Like, they established their parameters pretty early but they lose their nerve. And part of it is that pivotal moment where somebody asks the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, like, "How would you define victory if we do, in fact, like escalate this war in Vietnam?" And his answer is <u>so</u> weaselly. But they're like, they're all so fucking confident in their own abilities. There's this like distributed hubris in the room that they believe in their own abilities and each others' abilities. That they're just like, yeah. Like... even this bullshit answer of, "We're going to fight them to a tie so that they like realize that they can't win?" <i>[Laughs.]</i>
00:34:30	Adam	Host	That was like the core scene in the movie to me. Was that <u>no</u> one ever talked about winning the war. And that winning the war was forcing a stalemate.
00:34:41	Ben	Host	Yeah. What mean victory, Rambo.
00:34:44	John	Host	That's exactly what happened in Iraq and Afghanistan! What's your definition of victory here? What's your definition of victory in the War on Terror?
00:34:53	Ben	Host	It's a question that the <u>press</u> didn't even ask, y'know? Like... when we were deciding—as a country—to go to Afghanistan and Iraq.

00:35:11 Adam Host Like, go get the guys that got us was kind of on the list? But it wasn't like, the only... it was clearly not the only goal.
It's so interesting that like... this movie made in 2002 is made to ask those questions in the lead-up to the war you're talking about, Ben.

00:35:20 Crosstalk Crosstalk **Ben:** God, I didn't even think about that.

Adam: Like, this is at that moment in history.

00:35:24 John Host **John:** That's crazy.
What's crazy about American government is that, like, you don't need a reporter on the ground in Vietnam to call the White House and say, "Hey, well, let me tell ya, y'know, they like rice dishes here. They've got a delicious soup. It's called Pho. Y'know, what—" We have people who know what there is to know. There's never, in government, the proper inclusion of people who spend their lives studying other cultures; politics; history; government, even. Y'know, like Dean Rusk in this movie is the Secretary of State and all of their Secretary of State apparatus in this movie? IT's all this kind of... diplomacy as the highest level mentality? But there are people in the American government in 1964 who are like... raising their hands and going, "Uh, I—y'know, I have a PhD in Vietnamese history and culture. And my desk mate over here has a PhD in, y'know, Marxism in Asia. And we would just like to say—" And this was true in Iraq and Afghanistan! You know, there are people raising their hands and saying "There is no way to win a land war in Afghanistan."

00:36:50 Ben Host Hearts and minds are not available to us there.

00:36:52 John Host That's right. All you have to do is read the *Flashman* books. Y'know? Like, it's not... it really isn't science. And there's this—there's an engineering bias. In this 1964 White House and in... in White Houses in general. You want data. You want it broken down. You wanna take poll numbers into consideration. But you want to look at a map... you wanna move pieces around. And any time you get somebody in there in the room who's like, "Well, culturally you're not gonna be able to force these people to surrender; it's intrinsic to their culture that they never surrender. It's also intrinsic to their culture that they will put out a wonderful meal for you if you come visit their home."

00:37:43 Ben Host *[Through laughter]* Right. I think that like a problem with the way the media presents this stuff to us? Because at some point, it sort of turned into... like, they cover politics now kind of the same way they cover sports. Which is like, it's only exciting if we don't know who's gonna win until the very end and, y'know, like, each team has an equal—good, equally well-earned, y'know, champion status or whatever.

00:38:09 Adam Host Hearing you make a sports analogy is just a delight.

[Multiple people laugh.]

00:38:15 Ben Host And I just wanted to say that.
There's a Bill Clinton speech a few years ago where he was talking about—I think it was probably in the run-up to Obama's second election where he talked about the financial crisis and it was an issue in that election that... Obama had bailed out the automobile industry.

00:38:35 John Host The automobiles, huh?

00:38:38	Ben	Host	Yeah. <i>[Laughs.]</i> I'm also not interested in cars. Uh— <i>[Laughs.]</i> Gonna pay your bills? Gonna pay your automobiles?
00:38:41	John	Host	
00:38:44	Ben	Host	<i>[Adam laughs.]</i> Yeah. He said, like, no nation that has the capacity to manufacture automobiles would let it—y'know, in its right mind would let that capacity go away. And it was like, the Republicans were making an issue of like why did we bail out this industry? And... it just like cracked my brain open. Like, oh, yeah, like if you're the president you have to think about, like, "What things can my country do and how do I like make those capabilities bigger and better?" And... that just—it was just like so far from the like framing of that issue that we'd seen in the media, was like, "Oh, y'know, did you give a handout to this big business or not? And should he have, or not?" And like I think that... one thing that I picked up on in this movie is that LBJ kind of... he has like a very strong understanding of like he want—like, the version of the country he wants to leave office with in terms of domestic agenda. But it almost feels like—at least this characterization of—LBJ barely cares about the foreign policy side of what it means to be president. Like, he kind of wants to let the, y'know, the State Department and the Department of Defense kind of figure that out and tell him how to do it. And—
00:40:06	John	Host	I think that's not inaccurate. Yeah.
00:40:09	Ben	Host	There's that point in the movie where somebody's like, "Well, you made all these decisions. Like, they made the recommendations but you're the one that made the calls." And it's damning, but I feel like it's kinda just one scene in a movie that could've been making that case a little harder?
00:40:25	Adam	Host	Well, I mean, crucially about that scene, it isn't just... it isn't just the—the jab of "You decided. You're the decider. It's your job." It's the hook that follows later that he decided, but it was <u>against</u> his life experience and instinct to make the decisions that he did. It's not just that he made the wrong choice; it's that he acted against his nature that was—that made that scene so brutal.
00:40:51	John	Host	Except his nature was—and this is the thing about a charismatic leader. LBJ... believed... that he could cajole and swagger and pull his dick out. Y'know, he believed that if he can get a Southern congressman to vote for the Civil Rights Act, he can solve the problem in Vietnam. And just that feeling of like, yeah, he's not thinking foreign policy. You hardly ever hear him talk about the Soviets or the Chinese except in the sense that the Vietnam War is gonna bring them into the sphere. But this domino theory—this believe that if we didn't—if Vietnam became Communist, that Laos would and then that Thailand would and then... y'know, the Philippines would. This was just sort of conventional wisdom. It wasn't anybody's doctrine. It just became the kind of general sense of what geopolitics was. Which was this just bipolar... universe. You're either with us or against us. And LBJ just thought he could just sort of broad-shoulder his way through it.
00:42:13	Clip	Clip	Speaker: I can only give my best advice.
00:42:16	Ben	Host	McNamara does ride pretty hard for the domino theory, though.
00:42:21	John	Host	Oh, he does! But anyone in the room would've except for, y'know, except for Ball and—
00:42:28	Ben	Host	Well they also just care so much about not being the first administration to lose something. And they kind of feel like they've got the war already.

00:42:36 Adam Host That's a more persuasive argument than the domino theory to me. Because anyone who has ever advocated for the domino theory never speaks about it to its conclusion, which is—how does that affect us? Once it's done? Like, the fear of a communist Southeast Asia being a completed project. No one ever talks about, like, the consequence of that. In practical terms. What does that mean for our country? Really?

00:43:08 John Host What's interesting about the war of ideas between capitalism and communism—and it always surprises me how somewhere there was such a great insecurity about capitalism in the United States—in the mind of the West—like, they really did feel vulnerable. And it's funny because at the—because the way that they project it—the way that—I'm talking about just like the sort of Bilderberg group mentality about Western capitalism—was that it was—that there—people of the world would have a natural affinity for it. That if you projected through Hollywood movies what wealth and prosperity and Democratic freedom looked like, that people in the nations of the world would see it and admire it and aspire to it. And that's always been the American story. That people around the world—despite what they think about American bullying imperialism—they still want what America has. Y'know, they wanna come here. They want—

00:44:15 Adam Host And if for some reason they don't want it, and they don't accept our proselytization, they will accept it at the end of a rifle.

00:44:24 John Host That's that insecurity. Making a separate argument. Which is—you will. Right? But that—the insecurity is borne out of a feeling that somebody that is in the third world, for instance, is so far—that there would be so many steps that their nation would have to undertake for them to ever get a kind of Levittown experience for themselves?

[Ben laughs.]

That if you're in Algeria or you're in Vietnam... the appeal of Marxism is a lot more immediate. You're not—it—Marxism is not promising you Levittown. What Marxism is promising you is a levelling of status in your own world. So the, y'know, the village head man or the guys upstream are gonna get taken down a peg and that's gonna lift you. Not to a land of America, but to a—to your own land at a level that's, like incrementally better than what you have now.

00:45:34 Ben Host You're not gonna be putting a bunch of perfectly good food down the Insinkerator, but you'll be better off than you were yesterday.

00:45:41 John Host But also—and crucially—it's going to free you from imperialism as a—it's going to protect you from the French and the Americans coming into your country and trying to colonize it or take your rubber plants or, y'know, exploit you as workers. And that's where America is so insecure. Because if Vietnam becomes a Marxist country and Laos and then the Philippines and then Japan, what happens is that even in 1965, we had—there was enough of a global economy that—I mean, both ideologies presume that the whole world pursues that, y'know, that economic and political method. And it's very hard to have half the world be communist and half the world be capitalist because there's no point of intersection between the two. You can't really have trade. Y'know?

00:46:40 Ben Host Yeah.

00:46:41 00:46:44	Clip Adam	Clip Host	<p>Speaker: Bob, I know, opposes it. And every one of the chiefs. John, you were talking so much about like the insecurity of the moment? Being a reason for decisions being made politically around this time. And hearing you say that made me think about how this movie is so persuasive. About the insecurities surrounding the people involved. And how damaging past success can be to a certain type of person. Like, Lyndon Johnson—as you were saying—was known as one of the great politicians <u>ever</u>. And to know that that is his reputation leading up to his presidency and to see him fumble-fuck around this whole situation, I think, underscores that. But also you look at Robert McNamara and he’s being called the hero of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Like, he’s brought along into this new administration because of that reputation. He’s not coasting, but his reputation of past success gives him this credibility during this new problem. And you see him backslide. Due to this insecurity, too. As soon as the—as soon as his streak gets broken of wins? And the same goes for Lyndon Johnson. You can see them both get a little bit wide-eyed as the movie goes on. Like, I’m supposed to be winning right now! This is not what I do! And I really like that the film was so persuasive in that way about, y’know, it’s not just about... political insecurity. It’s about personal insecurity. During the making of these decisions.</p>
00:48:21	John	Host	<p>Yeah. And—just a complete failure to understand or try to understand where someone from somewhere else is coming from. Culturally. And it’s not just a Western bias that is a bias of “This is what I know”? It’s a Western bias that comes from a—just a conviction that everybody in the world wants what we have. And that what we have in America and in the West is the highest evolution thus far of the idea. And everyone else in the world that isn’t where we are—in terms of economic development and democratic politics—and sort of capitalist exchange—the reason they’re not there is they’re not there <u>yet</u>. It’s not that they’re not there because there’s another way of looking at it. It’s that they’re not there because they haven’t gotten there. And if they were just goosed along, that this is where they would inevitably arrive as well. So our job in the world is to help everybody else, y’know, like, leap-frog all the mistakes, y’know. Get—they don’t need their own Industrial Revolution. We’ll handle that for them. And like... it’s chauvinist. It’s—and it’s weird that they would have so much insecurity about it and so much—at the same time—like, unexamined confidence. That we are the best thing that ever happened, that ever was.</p>
00:49:59	Ben	Host	<p>It kinda ties in with that thing of LBJ being so passionate about, y’know, making sure that the casualties are low and that like nobody, y’know, like that they’re doing this the right way. That they aren’t, y’know, fighting this war in an ugly way. Because if you just believe that everybody is like essentially an American that hasn’t realized they’re an American yet, like, once we’re done with this war we set up a bunch of schools and highways and, y’know, and American-style infrastructure and they’ll believe all the same shit we believe—like, if you’re just mapping yourself onto the rest of the world I can see why he would behave that way. He’s not othering them; it’s like the opposite. He’s like, he sees himself in them because he doesn’t know them and doesn’t know that they aren’t him. <i>[Laughs.]</i></p>

00:50:48	John	Host	<p>Right. We look back now and say, what an incredible amount of hubris in the sense that the Civil Rights Movement is happening during the same period in the United States, and a disproportionate number of African-Americans are fighting in Vietnam. We're not even managing our own house in terms of, y'know, freedom and economic development for <u>Americans</u>. How could they have this chauvinism—this—this confidence that America was the best place and the best thing? But from their perspective, there was nowhere else in the world in 1960 that had a better record of, like, conflict or cultural resolution. Nowhere else in the world was treating their immigrant populations any better. Y'know, they see themselves as part of—at that point in time—the historical continuum. Which is... a continuum of increasing rights for everyone. And the fact that there are a lot of people in the United States in 1960 that don't have equivalent rights. There is not equity yet. Doesn't shock them. Because it had only just recently occurred to them. And they don't look at anywhere—there's not even, at that point, an academic model that suggests the kind of—the kind of vision we have now. Where it seems inevitable? And it seems like where we are now is kind of an embarrassment because we can look at 2020 from the perspective of 2050? In our imaginations? And they talk about that in this war. In this movie. When he leans in to Wallace and says, y'know, "How do you wanna be remembered in 1990?" In 1960, like, that sense we have of the inevitability of... the extension of the—of not just the franchise, but of equality in all respects. To everyone.</p>
00:52:44	Adam	Host	The United States Cinematic Universe.
00:52:47	John	Host	Right.
			<i>[Multiple people laugh.]</i>
			We feel that's so inevitable now that we're so frustrated that we have to be stuck in this moment in time. But that wasn't true in 1960. Y'know, that kind of science fiction... the familiarity with the idea that we're all—that if we could time travel, like, can't we just get on with it?
00:53:08	Ben	Host	Like, why does it take time to get these rights and these resources to these people that clearly need them, when you're sitting around in the Johnson administration, you're like, do you really think in like a few years there's gonna be like... like, we're gonna look back on the George Wallaces of the world and think that they were on the right side of history? No fucking way.
00:53:31	John	Host	But to extend that to the people of Vietnam? That they perceive—y'know, anyone in this administration only heard about Vietnam in 1954. And didn't think about it again. Until 1960.
00:53:48	Ben	Host	Right.
00:53:49	Adam	Host	How different is it to conceive of a world where a George Wallace can be persuaded and changed by a conversation with someone. I mean, Lyndon Johnson changed the trajectory of his life.
00:54:02	John	Host	Well, except George Wallace ran for president in 1972 on a white supremacist platform.
00:54:09	Adam	Host	I'm not forgiving George Wallace, obviously. But like, I thought he did not die the monster that he was for much of his life. Like I thought he recanted a bunch of shit. But maybe that's just the cowardice of a dying man.

00:54:23	John	Host	What happened with George Wallace was he got shot and paralyzed. The last act of George Wallace was that he was in a wheelchair. Y'know, that has a tendency to mellow a man.
00:54:35	Adam	Host	Shitting in a bag is really gonna change your perspective on supremacy, I bet.
00:54:38	John	Host	Yeah. Yeah. I mean, he was still governor of Alabama in 1975. And ran again... in 1976 in the primary against Carter, and I think what happened was he, like, did the whole "I found Jesus" thing. But by this point, we're in the '80s. He couldn't keep imagining a "separate but equal" Alabama. But I don't know if that means that he—oh, I forgot about this! He won <u>another</u> term of governor in 1982! '82! He's still governor of Alabama.
00:55:13	Clip	Clip	Speaker: I just may not be able to get things under control without some... assistance.
00:55:21	Adam	Host	Gary Sinise doesn't have a lot of scenes in this film, but I think he really does great in them. Gary Sinise, a frequent collaborator with John Frankenheimer, turns out. But I thought he was really good in this movie.
00:55:35	Ben	Host	I did, too. I noticed in the scene where they see George Wallace on TV that there's like a really slick camera move happening for a <i>[through laughter]</i> 1960s television broadcast of George Wallace yelling something on the steps of a statehouse?
00:55:52	Adam	Host	Right.
00:55:53	Ben	Host	And I was like, that's a camera move that they're doing in the rest of this movie, but it is not plausible that they would have a news camera set up on a dolly for...
			<i>[John laughs.]</i>
00:56:05	Adam	Host	<i>[Through laughter]</i> For George Wallace. I don't know which one of you mentioned that this film's strength is in its casting and not necessarily in its effects work. And there are some parts in the film that definitely look rough in that way. But there is a very specific visual language happening throughout the film that I did wanna talk about, which is the idea of two characters having different opinions about things being in the same focus. Using a split-diopter lens or something. Like, and I think it... emphasizes the sort of insanity a person must feel if you are Lyndon Johnson and you're getting your advice from two people in two different parts of the room. They're both in clear focus. They're both contradicting each other. And you're supposed to make a decision based on that. That clarity, when it's coming from multiple people, and holding those opposing ideas in your head at the same time, I thought, really emphasized the feeling that pervaded this entire movie!
00:57:04	John	Host	Agreed.
00:57:05	Ben	Host	Yeah. I mean, this is a movie about a bunch of different conversations that happen in smoky back rooms. And that can be a very, like, staid feeling? But this movie does not feel like that. And I think part of that is owing to the fact that Frankenheimer has the camera <u>flying</u> around these sets. Like, every—like, almost every setup has a camera move in it and it reminds me a little bit of <i>The West Wing</i> . Like, we're not getting walk-and-talks as much in a movie like this? But like how do you add visual interest to a film that is as, y'know, as confined to the kinds of spaces that this is confined to? And I think it's very... very well done in those terms.

00:57:55 John Host That's the kind of stuff that I don't notice at all? Except when it's done badly? And—

00:58:00 Ben Host *[Through laughter]* Yeah.

00:58:01 John Host And I didn't notice it in this movie because it was done well.

00:58:05 Ben Host I mean, when I watched *The West Wing*, when I watched this movie, I'm amazed at like the idea of a workplace—like, the White House is always depicted like this. Right? Like, people are screaming at each other. Like, the differences of opinion boil over and turn into shouting fights. And I wonder how much truth there is in that. Like, are the issues so big when you work at the White House that this is how things get done? Or is it just that this is how we dramatize what the White House might be like? 'Cause—like, if I had to go into a workplace every day where people were like, *[shouting]* "No, Ben! Fuck you! You're fucking wrong!"

[Adam laughs.]

00:58:46 Crosstalk Crosstalk I mean, like, obviously every time we talk about the podcast offline, it's kind of like that.

John: Yeah. You are fucking wrong, is why.

Adam: Yeah.

Ben: But—

[Adam laughs.]

00:58:51 Ben Host I don't know if I would wanna work there!

00:58:53 John Host I think it's a component of filling a cabinet with what you imagine are the smartest men in America that do this work. That there's not one of them that's gonna be like, "I'm gonna sit this argument out." Y'know, they're all gonna have a strong opinion about it and they're all gonna think everybody else is dumber than them.

00:59:11 Adam Host And the path of success that took them to that place is one of—a victory streak, right?

00:59:17 John Host Right.

00:59:18 Adam Host "How could I possibly be wrong in this argument? Look at my life up until now!"

00:59:22 Ben Host "I'm right about everything! That's like one of the main things about me!"

00:59:25 John Host There's gotta be a lot of power, too, in being the one in the room that disagrees. Y'know. Like—and I think what we see in the current administration is that the president doesn't brook any disagreement? So he fills his—well, he keeps firing people. He fires anybody that shows any independence. And he probably has filled his roster now with people that just nod and smile. To our everlasting detriment. But the whole concept of a president surrounding themselves with people that have a strong opinions and in a way... I mean, Johnson—the whole start of the movie where he gives that speech and he's like, "I've got all these guys from Harvard and Yale and I'm from the West Texas Teacher's College and I'm in charge. LOL."

[Multiple people laugh.]

And all the Harvard and Yale guys in the audience all kind of applaud but you can see they also have their teeth clenched?

[Through laughter] In the sense that like, “Oh, shit, we gotta work for this hick now.” Except that he was—except that Johnson was, like, incredibly gifted at the art of politics.

01:00:35 Ben Host He’s the exception that proves the rule. It’s not that it says anything about the kind of elitism of the halls of power.

01:00:43 John Host Well, and the thing is that elitism isn’t necessarily good at politics. It’s the old version of politics, which is like, yeah, this is—you go out there in your white linen suit and you kiss every baby and you get everybody to line up behind your program. Y’know. That’s so gone from American life now. And now it’s just like... you just walk around and you just count everybody’s head according to their political party and you’re like, “Well, it’s 54 against 46 again! I don’t know what we’re gonna do!” It’s like, well.

01:01:16 Ben Host Uh, gerrymander it a different way? I guess?

01:01:19 John Host *[Adam laughs.]*
Yeah, exactly. “Why don’t we put some more rules in the Senate about how guys—if they get up and go to the bathroom—they lose their vote?”

[Adam laughs.]

Like, the world has gone insane. Partly as a reaction to feeling like the old way of a guy in a white linen suit trading chickens with people was insane. It was just a—it was a different kind of insane. Watching this now, and trying—in a way it’s like a kind of cultural exchange. Trying to imagine this cabinet in their own terms? Rather than applying 21st-century thinking to what they were? Like, it’s interesting. This movie made in 2002, there’s still a very accurate depiction of the way people would’ve talked. The language they used. And if this movie were made now in 2020, I mean, this is a question for the room—do you think that they could have—that you could make this movie in 2020 and accurately depict the way people spoke? Or would—are there just too many words that you couldn’t have in a movie?

01:02:26 Adam Host It definitely took an adjustment to the flowery language that took some effort.

01:02:31 Ben Host Yeah. I mean, I think the modern treatment where LBJ is like, “Ho Chi Mihn is bae, alright? And bae got me like—”

[John laughs.]

01:02:44 John Host Would grate, somewhat.
I had no idea what you were saying at first. I was like... “Was there a character named Bay? It feels like maybe there could’ve been!”

01:02:50 Music Music *[Ben laughs.]*
Short reprise of theme song “War.”

01:02:54 Adam Host I think one of the centerpiece scenes in this film happens during one of the cabinet meetings. And it’s toward ’68 when things have gotten pretty dark. About the war. And it’s—it happens—like, the lights are out in the cabinet room. Everyone is looking over a slideshow. There’s an almost reverential tone to the description of the resilience of the Vietnamese people in this meeting? And it’s blowing people away. Their capacity to not only absorb losses—losses that, like, strategically? The United States was like—like—

they—they chalked up as victories. Like, yeah, we actually did destroy oil refineries and bridges and shit and then look at these slides from hours later. Like, they're rebuilt again. It's not that our strikes were unsuccessful? It's that their capacity to recover is so great. And that's like the moment where I feel like the great mistake of this war dawns on everyone. And there are many examples of this. There's the bicycle brigade; there's the teenage crater fillers; there's the guy who has a top ten hit song written about the person who attempted to assassinate McNamara? And I like— *[through laughter]* I could've lived for another couple of seconds on McNamara in that moment.

[John laughs.]

Like, just to gauge whether or not he's heard the song? You gotta believe he's listened to the song, right? If someone wrote a song about your attempted assassination... you'd have to—out of curiosity—listen to it, right?

01:04:36 John Host
01:04:40 Adam Host

It was a number one song in Vietnam!
C'mon, John!

[John laughs.]

Someone tries to kill you and then they write a song about it—you wouldn't find a copy of the song and listen to it, even if it was in a different language?

01:04:47 Crosstalk Crosstalk

John: Well, I would. I would, sure.

01:04:50 Adam Host

Adam: You'd have to do it.
If you're McNamara—I feel like he may be too incurious for that, but that was a moment. But then, like, the biggest, to me, was the stamp made out of Norman Morrison. Like, such was his legend in Vietnam that they made a postage stamp with his face on it. And to me, I think that makes a great rating system for *Path to War*. Like, this is an enemy that was underestimated from the start. But is *Path to War* an underestimated made-for-television war film? About the Vietnam War? It's up to us to decide. One to five stamps will be the rating system.

I really like that this film is more about personality than strategy? I think this is an angle to the war that I personally haven't often gotten through my movie watching. And so I think when we started having the conversation, there was... a resistance to a film like this. Like, it's too talky. It's too... it's too conversational. It's too dramatic and three hours—would it be able to hold our attention? And I feel like personally it really did. And it was for that reason. I liked getting to understand the perspectives in play here. And I was very surprised at how... sympathetically... all the parties were presented..

01:06:19 Adam Host

I mean, before I watched this movie, my position was that Lyndon Johnson was a hawk and he was waiting behind Kennedy to start this war. And Kennedy's death, like, made it happen. And he was like chomping at the bit to begin it. But that is not the story that this movie tells. It made me feel sorry for Johnson, a person who rose to power in really sad ways. Having an idea of what he wanted to do and then having his direction wrestled away from him in the way

that it was. Made him especially sympathetic to me. And whether or not it's true, I'm trying to judge the film for its ability to tell this story. And, like, LBJ being a victim of his circumstances and not the architect of them? I think can teach us a lot about how presidents operate from then on. Even modern ones. Like, a president is only as good as the advice that they get. And the advisors who give it. And I think you can see a lot of parallels between then and now. And I think the "now" I'm talking about is the 2002 George W. Bush administration. But like... you see a... a president at that time who was ably manipulated by the people he was surrounded with. And I think the essential question of this film is, who has the power in a presidential administration? I think the film makes a case that it may not be the president and that is a very interesting thing to think about. I thought the ending to this film was so sad. We didn't talk at all about it, but the surprise moment of Johnson announcing that he would not seek or accept a nomination. It almost rushes through and past that moment and we don't really get to live in the consequences of it. But I wonder how differently we would feel about the film if we got another five to ten minutes to sit with the consequence of that decision. 'Cause kind of a lot happened in the aftermath. I like the movie a lot. It's not something that I would... suggest everyone sees? But if you're a Vietnam War film completionism, I think this belongs in your bookshelf of films to watch. I think it was well worth watching. I'm gonna give it four and a quarter of those Norman Morrison stamps

01:08:50 Ben Host

Were you—every time they talked about what was going on on the ground in Vietnam—just picturing Colonel Trautman and John Rambo running around?

[John laughs.]

01:08:59 Adam Host

Yeah!

01:09:03 John Host

Of course he was! Rambo. Drenched in sweat.

01:09:08 Adam Host

I thought about the shine box scene. And how tragic that was.

01:09:12 Ben Host

Yeah. The end is pretty amazing, because it's like... it's this descent into chaos. That at every point he has—like, he's offered so many times the option of, "Let's stop." Like, they can't get their heads around the idea of, "If we quit now and like try to put this thing, y'know, back on the path toward diplomacy, like, it's gonna look like we lost. And then I'm gonna be the guy that lost the first war for the United States." And, like, the disgrace that he leaves the administration in is so much worse than that.

01:09:53 Adam Host

Yeah.

01:09:54 Ben Host

So fucking tragic. And a tragedy of his own making, in a lot of ways. I agree that this is not like required viewing by any means. But it is a really fascinating story and I think they, y'know, like, I don't think that this movie paints outside the lines too much. I think it tries to be pretty close to... depicting the kinds of things that actually happened. And I feel like I learned a lot from it. I feel like I have a understanding of how we got into the Vietnam conflict that is richer and more nuanced now than I did before. And part of that is the movie and part of it is the reading I did after the movie. But I'm really glad I saw it, so I'll give it four stamps.

01:10:38 John Host

I think a part of the movie that's missing... is the degree to which Johnson's sense of himself in history—not wanting to be the guy that lost the first war for the United States; not wanting to appear soft on communism; not wanting to suffer that loss of face. What

isn't in the movie is how much of that is driven by his conscious—the sense of him being conscious of American domestic political opinion. Like, what Johnson was thinking about, a lot of the time, and you see it. It's teased in this movie, right? You see him looking at the newspaper; the editorial column or the editorial cartoon.

But it's almost entirely personified in the character played by Philip Baker Hall, Everett Dirksen, who was like a prominent Republican senator at the time. And what we have is this character—Senator Hall—who is like a sympathetic friend but also a Republican partisan? But this was the rise—this was the dawn of the rise of American conservatism. This era. The Goldwater era. Where all of a sudden—y'know, Nixon lost to Kennedy and there became this groundswell of hawkish, conspiracy-minded, libertarian philosophy, conservative opposition. That during the Johnson administration was regarded as fringe? Y'know, it didn't really get mainstreamed until Reagan? But it was really there.

And every time Johnson showed any kind of—any time any politician showed lenience or sympathy or... even the slightest bit of vulnerability—I'm talking about toward the Soviets or to the Vietnamese or whoever our perceived enemy was—there was this incredibly vocal response that they were soft on Communism. That they were too liberal to meet the threat of this global Communist octopus that was ready to engulf the world. And so Democratic politicians, despite having bigger fish to fry in their own minds, felt like they had to be fighting this rear action against the criticism that they were too soft on communism. Otherwise they would become politically vulnerable in America. And you just didn't see that in this movie, so much.

01:13:22 John

Host

Y'know. Johnson appears to be making these decisions based on his sense of how he's gonna appear in the history books? Which I think was true. But you—but there wasn't that—because we do see him gradually go from being—gradually fall out of favor with the Left. But the story isn't completely told about how much he was—how much he ran as a peace candidate and became a war president. Because he was being pushed—or felt pushed and pressured by this political movement on the American Right. I think this movie is important to watch for people—even as a—because this kind of like deep dive into politics... it's just so useful!

When you're thinking about what's happening now; when you're thinking about the last ten years; when you think about the next ten years. I think what's useful about it is that all these guys—as they were coming up in the 1930s and '40s—they were leftists! They were the radicals! Y'know, these were the people that had ideas that seemed crazy at the time. And watching them go from 1940 to 1970, and gradually—and, y'know, it's a valid criticism that they were the radical Left but they all went to Groton—but watching them become not just disillusioned but gradually go through this process of becoming the establishment, and then the—y'know, the establishment conservativized them and corrupted them and by 1970, they are the enemy of the people.

You can imagine how disillusioned—or how just like, soul-crushing that was. Y'know, Lyndon's—he says it a few times in the movie.

Like, “Wait a minute! I’m the hero of the people!” And he can’t believe that it’s Vietnam that ends up being his undoing. So anyway. In that sense, it’s a—I think it’s crucial to watch and this is a war movie, absolutely. It’s the kind of war movie that makes this show like fun to do. But there’s just too much missing from it, I think, for me to give it more than three and a half stamps. Because if they had made Gambon put a zucchini in his pants?

[Ben laughs.]

So it’s like, alright, every scene, just be conscious of the fact that there is a foil-wrapped zucchini in your pants, and let that be—let that guide, like, how far out you jut your chin. I think it would’ve been a little closer.

01:16:15	Adam	Host	Makes me wonder whether or not your guy is wrapped in foil, John.
01:16:19	Ben	Host	Mm-hm.
01:16:20	Adam	Host	Who would your guy be in this film?
01:16:24	John	Host	So my guy—you didn’t see in this movie. My guy was McGeorge Bundy, who’s played by Cliff De Young. He only appears a couple of times. And is kind of dismissed in one scene by Johnson? He says something and Johnson kind of cuts him off. But McGeorge Bundy was a classic example of this guy I’m talking about. Right? He was like the young, preppy, smarty-pants, leftist—I mean, McNamara was the Secretary of Defense. Bundy was the National Security Advisor. Like, he’s the one kind of sitting in the org chart closer to Johnson. And he was very involved in all of this. And was, y’know the classic sort of... elite, liberal thinker that gradually became a sort of hawkish mid-‘60s Democrat. And kind of equally an architect of the war? Also awarded a Presidential Medal of Freedom in Johnson’s final act. Like, a main character! Of this story! And in the movie he just is sort of like... he’s—he appears like twice as the guy with the funny haircut? And then... is gone.
01:17:44	Ben	Host	Well, you’ve definitely appears as a guy with a funny haircut before, John.
01:17:47	John	Host	Boy, that’s my thing.

[Adam laughs.]

But he’s always been a character that was important to me in reading about this stuff and I think it’s because when I was 13 and I realized there was—that Johnson’s National Security Advisor was named “McGeorge”—

[Ben laughs.]

I was like, “I gotta know more about whatever culture it is that could produce a man named “McGeorge.”

01:18:11	Ben	Host	Is it New England elite? <i>[Laughs.]</i>
01:18:14	John	Host	It is, yeah. That’s exactly what it is. <i>[Laughs.]</i>

[Multiple people laugh.]

01:18:20	Ben	Host	Good guy. We haven’t talked a ton about the women in this film. Lady Bird Johnson has a number of scenes. Real fun portrayal by Felicity Huffman. Whenever I hear the name “Lady Bird” I just think of Hank Hill calling his dog? <i>[Mimics King of the Hill character Hank Hill]</i> “Laaaaady Biiiiird!” <i>[Regular voice]</i> But it’s one of their
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daughters that is my guy. For a scene where LBJ is sitting in the Oval Office by himself. He's just like pulled a chair up to like three feet in front of the TVs that he has over in the corner and is just yelling his head off at Bobby Kennedy on the TV screen? And one of his daughters, like, comes in to say something to him and sees him yelling at Bobby Kennedy and just kinda *[through laughter]* turns and slinks out. So like, "Eh. I know when dad is in a mood like this not to interrupt him." Is basically— *[Laughs.]*

[Adam laughs.]

What that scene telegraphs to me. And I laughed out loud at the moment. I thought the performance was great. And y'know, for as sidelined as the women are in this movie I think the performances were all really great.

01:19:32 Adam Host My guy also comes from a scene of... of mood. God, the discomfort of that scene where George Ball gets drunk.

[Ben laughs.]

And he starts laying into people is pretty rough. But there is a social combat black belt move that comes from Dean Rusk in this scene. That is so subtle. And perfectly done. So there's a group of people talking and Dean Rusk is one of 'em when George Ball approaches. And everyone sees him coming. But Dean Rusk has a plan in his back pocket to stop this terrible thing from happening before it starts. So he signals his wife, who is talking in a different group? To come over and say that the banquet's ready or something. Something to break up the conversation. He's done this wordlessly to her. And as soon as Ball approaches, ready to drunkenly... throw his firebomb in the middle of the group—

[John laughs.]

01:20:38 Ben Host —she comes over and breaks it up!
Oh, how I envy that wordless communication.

[John laughs.]

01:20:43 Adam Host Yeah. Something that really from the realm of science fiction.
01:20:47 Ben Host I've pitched that to my wife a million times. We need a couple of just like cues when we're in a big group of people that we can just make eye contact and you'll know. Or I'll know. That X needs to happen.
01:20:59 Adam Host Yeah. Impossible. Impossible to conceive of today. But back then... nice bit of business deployed there by Secretary of State Dean Rusk. Probably what made him such a capable Secretary of State was thinking like that. It was just a—like, a micro-scene within the greater story here that I just really delighted in. So I'm gonna make him my guy for that.

01:21:24 Ben Host Good guy.

01:21:25 Music Music Short reprise of theme song "War."

01:21:29 Ben Host Time to pick our next film, gentlemen!

01:21:31 John Host Oh, yeah. Let me get my dice cup going here. There's been a lot of talk about our dice rolls.

01:21:39 Ben Host Yeah.

01:21:40 John Host Recently. And I wanna just explain to people that I roll the 120-sided die here in Seattle, Washington. And Ben, the keeper of the

master list, then finds the number and reveals the movie. Now, I believe Ben to be a person of very high integrity. And so when Ben tells us the movie, I believe that Ben is doing an honest and forthright job of obeying the rules of the randomized list.

01:22:16 Ben Host Well, it's—yeah. I mean, and it's randomized even further because every week I add a film or two. Y'know, we get recommendations from people on our various social media channels and I occasionally see one as like a—"If you liked this, you might like this!" when we watch a movie and I'll check to see if it's on the list and if it's not I'll add it.

01:22:38 John Host And then you re-randomize it!

01:22:39 Ben Host And when I add a movie, I randomize the list again. So there's a lot of randomization at play here.

01:22:45 John Host Yeah. There's always some speculation—some haters out there—that think we're gaming the system because Adam is so adamant about not letting people peek behind his curtain. But I want people to know that we—

01:22:59 Adam Host I don't want anyone to see my foil-covered dick.

01:23:04 John Host *[All laugh.]*
We have a conceit for this podcast and we adhere to that conceit, 'cause all three of us are like... super-duper tightly-wound about weird stuff like this. Anyway. Here's the dice roll. 100% authentic dice in a cup.

[Sound of dice rolling across clanking surface. Adam laughs.]

01:23:36 Ben Host I wanna make sure this die is nice and rolled.

01:23:38 John Host Yeah. Sounds well-rolled to me.

01:23:41 Ben Host 93! 93 is the number.

01:23:48 Music Music 93! Ooh! We are staying in the Vietnam era, gentlemen.

01:23:49 Ben Host Funky, retro music with brass and acoustic bass plays in background of dialogue.
This is a 1995 film directed by the Hughes brothers. It's *Dead Presidents*! I saw this movie a long time ago. It's like guys who are trying to do a heist and also kind of like processing their trauma from Vietnam at the same time? I guess a lot of like, Vietnam-as-flashback, if memory serves.

01:24:09 John Host It's a heist!

01:24:10 Adam Host Huh!

01:24:11 John Host Heist movie!

01:24:12 Ben Host I think so. That's the *Dead Presidents*.

01:24:17 John Host Right, right, right.

01:24:18 Ben Host Referenced in the title.

01:24:21 John Host *[Adam laughs.]*
I didn't see it at the time.

01:24:24 Ben Host You added it to the list, actually! Interestingly enough.

01:24:27 John Host Yeah. One that I wanted to see.

["War" theme song begins playing quietly in background of dialogue.]

01:24:38 Ben Host I think I missed it because... I just wasn't going to movies in 1995.

01:24:39 John Host Yeah.
Too busy getting high on my own supply!

01:24:43	Ben	Host	<p><i>[Ben laughs.]</i> Alright. Well, I'm really looking forward to it. This is one I've been meaning to revisit, so that will be next week on <i>Friendly Fire</i>. In the meantime, we're gonna leave it with Robs Robs Robs Robs. So for John Roderick and Adam Pranica, I've been Ben Harrison. To the victor go the spoiler alerts!</p>
01:25:06	Rob Schulte	Producer	<p><i>[Theme song plays at full volume briefly until fading into background of dialogue.]</i> <i>Friendly Fire</i> is a Maximum Fun podcast hosted by Adam Pranica, Ben Harrison, and John Roderick. This show is produced by me, Rob Schulte. Our theme music is "War" by Edwin Starr, courtesy of Stone Agate Music, and our podcast art is by Nick Ditmer. Would you like to hear more of <i>Friendly Fire</i>? Last year we covered <i>The Big Red One</i>, a movie starring Lee Marvin and Mark Hamill that follows a hardened sergeant and the four core members of his infantry unit as they try to survive WWII. You can also gain access to our bonus episodes by heading to MaximumFun.org/join, and for as little as \$5 a month, not only will you receive <u>our</u> pork chop episodes? You'll also gain access to <u>all</u> the MaximumFun bonus content. You can now follow us on Twitter and Instagram under the handles FriendlyFireRSS. Thanks for listening. We'll see you next week with another episode of <i>Friendly Fire</i>!</p>
01:26:23	Speaker 1	Guest	<p><i>[Theme song plays briefly at full volume before fading away entirely.]</i> MaximumFun.org</p>
01:26:26	Speaker 2	Guest	Comedy and culture.
01:26:27	Speaker 3	Guest	Artist owned—
01:26:28	Speaker 4	Guest	—Audience supported.