

The contradictions of Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's *The Vietnam War*

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The Vietnam War, a film by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, written by Geoffrey Ward, narrated by Peter Coyote

A 10-part, 18-hour film series directed by veteran documentary filmmakers Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, *The Vietnam War* contains footage, photographs, interviews and tape recordings whose cumulative impact is immensely powerful. It evokes in the viewer a sense of horror. The film provides evidence that the war resulted in more than 3 million dead, the vast majority of them Vietnamese civilians slaughtered by American bombs, artillery shells, napalm and other weaponry.

The documentary is a major project, which was undertaken with vast corporate sponsorship. The involvement of Ken Burns, and its broadcast on Public Television, endows the documentary with a semi-official character. It reflects, in objective terms, where a significant section of official American liberal “public opinion” stands in relation to the Vietnam War more than 40 years after its end. Based on this documentary, one is compelled to conclude that this layer of opinion makers has never come to grips with the reality of Vietnam, that is still lying to the world and to itself, and attempting to relativize and justify policies and actions that rank among the most criminal in the 20th century.

By rights, the war should have been followed by the American equivalent of the Nuremberg Tribunal, at which all those responsible for planning and supervising the US intervention would have been publicly indicted for their crimes, prosecuted and sent to prison. That never happened, and American public life—and American culture more broadly—have suffered ever since from this colossal moral failure.

What followed the war, instead of such a fundamental examination of how such crimes came to be committed, was a persistent attempt to salvage something from the catastrophe, to disguise its criminal character, to legitimize it, and to gradually erode what came to be known as the “Vietnam syndrome”—the pervasive and entirely justified distrust and resistance of the American people toward new foreign military interventions.

One of the major techniques employed by the US ruling elite to overcome the legacy of Vietnam was to hide behind the soldiers, the two and a half million Americans who fought in the war, many of them unwilling draftees. Appeals for sympathy for the veterans were employed, in a sort of moral blackmail, to cover up the central issue of the criminality of the enterprise in which those soldiers were ordered to take part. Anyone who rejects the claim that the Vietnam War was merely a “mistake” and demands a more penetrating and critical approach is smeared as denying the suffering and sacrifice of the soldiers.

The Vietnam War, broadcast over PBS over 10 nights out of 12 (September 17-28), and now being rebroadcast one night a week, is an example of this technique, although it is done with relative subtlety, and avoids the heavy-handed approach first voiced by President Ronald Reagan (who pronounced the war a “noble failure”) and now regularly employed to block critical analysis of the ongoing US wars of intervention in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, etc.

Moral “equivalency” of the invaders and the invaded

The fatal contradiction of the Burns and Novick program is that they show crime after crime—mass slaughters, breaches of international law, government lying, cover-ups of war crimes—but these exposures are embedded in an overall narrative which asserts the essential moral equivalency of US imperialism and the Vietnamese resistance. Both sides are shown engaging in ruthless military operations, massacres, assassinations, targeting of innocents, as well as gross misjudgments and systematic lying.

The film does interview Vietnamese who played significant roles in the war, both in the National Liberation Front (NLF or “Viet Cong”) and in the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). It humanizes the “enemy” in a way that has not been done previously in American television. But this does not alter the basic framework of equivalency, in which the American soldiers are presented as victims of the war, and the bulk of the interviews are conducted with American veterans who discuss the impact of the war on themselves and the comrades they lost in battle.

It is true that American soldiers suffered greatly during the war, and deserve sympathy. But that does not justify the American invasion of Vietnam, any more than the sacrifices of Confederate soldiers justified the slaveholders’ rebellion in the American Civil War, or the suffering of German soldiers on the Eastern Front in World War II justified Nazism.

The American soldiers suffered in Vietnam because the United States invaded that country in order to block its reunification under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh. No Vietnamese were killed invading the United States. No American cities or towns were bombed, no American farms were burned, no American civilians died because of the actions of the NLF or NVA.

The Burns and Novick film examines the war through the lens of 79 eyewitnesses, the majority of them Americans, most of these soldiers who fought in Vietnam. They discuss their experiences of the war and their return to the United States, when some became activists against the war, and they reflect on the impact of the war on their lives. Almost without exception, the rank-and-file soldiers interviewed appear serious, thoughtful, regretful and fundamentally humane.

But the intense focus on the experience of a comparative handful of individual soldiers has damaging consequences. Their personal experiences cannot serve as a substitute for historical and political analysis of the war or provide a politically coherent narrative. Instead, the very attractiveness and decency of the former soldiers is used to buttress a narrative that essentially exonerates the US government of deliberate criminality and mass murder.

The film footage of the era is selected and edited with the skill we have come to expect from Burns and Novick, with one additional feature: they make use of the contemporaneous tape-recordings of White House telephone conversations and internal discussions, which show the cynical

double-dealing of Lyndon Johnson and Robert McNamara, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, in a very powerful way.

It is a truism that “they all lie.” But to hear the president and his top aides discussing their real intentions and plans for the war, and then saying the direct opposite to the press and the public, adds a new dimension. No one who watches this film will listen to a presidential speech or press conference in the same way again.

The first—and last—“television war”

The film and photographic record of the period is remarkable. *The Vietnam War* incorporates iconic images like the summary execution of a National Liberation Front fighter during the Tet offensive, the massacre at My Lai, the agony of a young girl burned by napalm, and the shooting of students of Kent State, each placed in a sequence of film footage and still photos that add to the devastating impact.

It has been said that Vietnam was “the first television war,” but it was also the last. The Pentagon learned its lesson, and every American war since Vietnam has been conducted on the basis of strict military censorship imposed by “embedding” reporters with military units and denying them the ability to move freely in the war zone. The American corporate media has responded obediently, tailoring its coverage to the dictates of the military-intelligence apparatus.

For the raw material alone, *The Vietnam War* deserves the widest possible audience. The interviews, the film footage, the still photos and the tape-recordings have a cumulative effect. The contemporary viewer can hardly avoid concluding, even though Burns and Novick bend over backwards to avoid drawing this conclusion explicitly, that the Vietnam War delivered a shock to American society from which it has never really recovered.

That said, the analysis provided by the narrative never goes beyond the conventional framework of liberal anti-communism—the very same ideology that guided those who instigated and escalated the American intervention in Vietnam, who were for the most part liberal Democrats in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. The tone is set in the opening remarks of the first episode, when narrator Peter Coyote says the Vietnam War was “begun in good faith by decent people out of fateful misunderstandings, American overconfidence and Cold War miscalculations.”

The effort to equate the actions of the two sides in the war necessitates a gross distortion of the historical record, as some antiwar commentators have noted. The violence perpetrated by the United States in Vietnam was of a genocidal character. Eight million tons of bombs were dropped on North and South Vietnam alone, far more than in all theaters of World War II combined. In addition, US warplanes dropped 370,000 tons of napalm and sprayed 21 million gallons of toxic defoliant chemicals like Agent Orange.

Approximately 58,000 Americans died in the war, compared to 3 million Vietnamese. The Vietnam War Memorial in Washington DC displays those 58,000 names on a granite wall that at its highest point is 10 feet tall. A similar display of the names of the Vietnamese dead would be a granite wall the height of the Washington Monument.

A war of national liberation

A central issue, largely avoided by Burns and Novick, is the

revolutionary nature of the war being fought by the Vietnamese, a national liberation struggle directed first against French colonialism and then against its semi-colonial successor, the United States, but also directed against the class of landlords and capitalists within Vietnam itself, who acted as the domestic collaborators of the foreign occupier.

Take, for example, the beginning of guerrilla war in South Vietnam in 1959-60. Burns and Novick attribute this to popular opposition to the dictatorial character of the US-backed regime of Ngo Dinh Diem. But the formation of the National Liberation Front had a powerful social component. As one critical analyst of the Vietnam War noted:

“Beginning in 1960, Vietcong began to appear in villages to renew the struggle against landlords. Large landowners were threatened; small landowners were told to reduce their rents below 25 percent; and tenants were told not to leave their villages to pay rent, but instead to make landlords come into the countryside and thus face the Vietcong.”

As the struggle developed, landlords subcontracted the collection of rents to provincial and district government officials and military officers: “Vietnamese peasants were confronted with both the civil administration and the army acting as direct agents of landlords” [James William Gibson, *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam*, (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986) pp. 74-75].

There is not a hint of such a social analysis in the Burns-Novick documentary series. But without this, it is impossible to understand why successive US administrations intervened in Vietnam. It was not simply a matter of the simplistic anti-communism of the “domino theory,” but a genuine fear of the global repercussions of a revolutionary victory over imperialism by the workers and peasants of Vietnam.

Despite the crimes committed by the Stalinist leadership in Hanoi, which murdered the Vietnamese Trotskyists and sought to suppress any independent struggle by the working class, and the backstabbing treachery of the Stalinist bureaucracies in Moscow and Beijing, which used the Vietnamese struggle as a bargaining chip for their maneuvers with imperialism, the driving force of events in Vietnam was a mass revolutionary movement from below.

There is a glimpse of this reality in the interviews with the National Liberation Front and NVA fighters, whose demeanor contrasts sharply with that of the American soldiers who fought against them. The Vietnamese speak with great confidence and energy; despite the awful sacrifices of the war, they are rightfully proud of their contribution to the struggle against imperialism.

The Americans are deeply conflicted, regarding the war as a tragic waste of life and limb. This disillusionment goes so far that, in a remarkable statement, the former pilot Merrill McPeak, who went on to become Air Force chief of staff during the first Persian Gulf War, expresses admiration for the discipline and courage of the soldiers, truck drivers and porters he was bombing on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. When they are compared to the corrupt and cowardly Saigon officer clique, he says, “We were fighting on the wrong side.”

Exposures and apologetics

Nearly every episode combines both revelatory moments and segments that outrage an informed viewer. Episode Seven, “The Veneer of Civilization (June 1968–May 1969)” is a good example of this contradictory combination. There is footage of CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite describing the attacks on protesters by police in Chicago as the Democratic National Convention assembles. “The Democratic National Convention is taking place within a police state,” he says. “There seems to be no other way to say it.” One cannot imagine such a statement from a

television anchorman today.

The episode also examines Nixon's secret maneuvering with South Vietnam to block peace talks to aid his campaign in the 1968 presidential election. Johnson learned of this through CIA surveillance but kept silent to avoid exposing the illegal wiretaps. We hear a White House tape of Nixon lying to Johnson directly in a phone conversation, assuring the president of his full support for the peace negotiations in Paris.

But the episode also discusses the CIA-directed Phoenix Program, indicating that it killed 20,000 people and no one knows how many of them were "innocent," that is, not Viet Cong. Presumably the assassination of Viet Cong leaders was morally legitimate, and only the killing of the unaffiliated should provoke resentment. The narrator continues, stating as an apparent contradiction that despite the success of the Phoenix Program in "degrading" the Viet Cong infrastructure, the Thieu government remained massively unpopular. A program of mass assassination was carried out, but the government that perpetrated it remained unpopular. Why should we be surprised?

This section ends with perhaps the film's most blunt assertion of the case for defending Saigon against Hanoi, quoting one American intelligence operative to the effect that, while North Vietnam was a repressive communist state, the Saigon regime was "filthy but free." This section includes still photos of the so-called "tiger cages," where tens of thousands of NLF prisoners were held in barbaric underground cells, where many died, but it does not identify the photos or explain their meaning. "Free" indeed.

A corporate-financed production

The uneven character of the film is almost inevitable, given the political limitations of the co-directors, Burns and Novick, and the constraints imposed by the necessity to raise \$30 million, mainly from corporate sponsors and foundations, to finance its production.

Watching the long list of such sponsors during the first minute of each episode, including the Ford, Rockefeller and Mellon foundations, billionaire David H. Koch (one of the infamous right-wing Koch brothers), Bank of America, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (an arm of the US government), it is no wonder that there is no discussion in the 18-hour program of the role of corporate profit in the Vietnam War.

Only one US corporation, Dow Chemical, is even mentioned in the series, and it would have been difficult to avoid naming the manufacturer of napalm, frequently targeted by antiwar protesters. Shamefully, the filmmakers are silent on this critical aspect of the war. However horrific for the Vietnamese people and the Americans conscripted to fight, the conflict in Vietnam was a gold mine for a select band of war profiteers.

Even without the self-censorship required to raise funds from corporate America, Burns and Novick wear their own blinders, methodological and political. They have produced a long list of documentaries, painstaking, serious, sometimes brilliant (the 1990 series *The Civil War*, which made their reputation), but never questioning the existing social order.

Burns and Novick decided to base *The Vietnam War* mainly on eyewitness testimony, interspersed within a narrative written by historian Geoffrey Ward and read by actor Peter Coyote. In contrast to *The Civil War*, they interview no historians to provide explanations for the illustrations and context for the eyewitness accounts.

The result is post-modernism carried to an extreme: a work of history that dispenses with coherent narrative, beyond the most elementary chronology. The Vietnam War is effectively reduced to the experience of individuals—in this case the 79 individuals selected by Burns and Novick, out of many hundreds they interviewed, themselves a tiny subset of the

tens of millions of potential eyewitnesses.

Smearing the antiwar movement

This arbitrary selection finds its most perverse expression in the comparatively little time given to non-military participants in the antiwar movement in the United States. Only two individuals are interviewed who participated in the antiwar movement without first fighting in Vietnam, and both represent an upper-middle-class, pro-Democratic Party layer.

Bill Zimmerman, interviewed extensively, is now co-owner of a lucrative political consulting firm in Los Angeles. He worked on the Harold Washington campaign in Chicago, backed Tom Hayden's campaigns for state legislature in California, and managed Moveon.org's failed \$23 million campaign to defeat George W. Bush in 2004. He is a financial supporter of the Democratic Socialists of America.

Nancy Biberman, a Barnard College student who participated in the Columbia University protests in 1968, went on to become a Legal Services Corporation lawyer and to found the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation, which promotes low-cost housing in the South Bronx, and green, environmentally friendly, housing using solar energy, as well as a charter school sponsored by Bard College. She is married to Roger Evans, Director of Public Policy and Law at Planned Parenthood Federation of America.

Only two excerpts of her interview are included in the film, and the second is particularly foul. She apologizes for antiwar protesters calling US soldiers "baby-killers"—an event which probably never happened, according to most serious historical accounts. The final statement of a participant in the antiwar movement, placed towards the end of the concluding episode, is a tearful "I'm sorry," addressed to supposedly maligned American soldiers. To say that this leaves a bad taste in one's mouth is an understatement.

Through these two individuals, Burns and Novick misrepresent and smear the entire antiwar movement, which involved millions of young people, many workers, some of the most important intellectuals, academics, scientists and entertainers, and even athletes like Muhammad Ali. The antiwar movement reached out tirelessly to soldiers, through institutions like GI coffee houses set up near every significant US military base, and organizations like Vietnam Veterans Against the War and the Winter Soldier project, which gathered testimony from veterans about US war crimes in Vietnam.

For the vast majority of those who joined the antiwar movement, their participation in such protests was not something to apologize for, but one of the high points of their lives, a moment when they truly did "make a difference." They helped to end a war and ultimately bring down a president, Richard Nixon, whose resignation under the threat of impeachment was a byproduct of the debacle in Vietnam and the mass opposition it triggered at home.

The sour attitude of the Burns and Novick film towards the antiwar movement is perhaps the clearest way in which they have adapted to the reactionary requirements of official American politics in 2017, which forbids any questioning of the military operations of American imperialism.

The United States has been engaged for more than 25 years in nearly continuous warfare, repeating all the crimes of the Vietnam intervention, with the addition of new and more technologically sophisticated means of mass murder—drone-fired missiles, "smart" bombs, and the "mother of all bombs," recently dropped on Afghanistan, the largest explosive detonated since Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In that context, the building of an antiwar movement, based on the

independent mobilization of the working class, is the most urgent political task. Whatever the intentions of Burns and Novick, the evidence of imperialist atrocities and lies assembled in their film can help politically educate a new generation.



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