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REVIEW ESSAY

There is no single lie in war (films): Ken Burns, Lynn Novick, and *The Vietnam War*

The Vietnam War, directed by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, PBS, 2017, 10 episodes, US\$99.99 (DVD)

Most everything one needs to know about Ken Burns's and Lynn Novick's epic interpretation of the Vietnam War is evident in their summary of the conflict in the film's eighteenth and final hour. "The Vietnam War was a tragedy, immeasurable and irredeemable," declares narrator Peter Coyote. "But meaning can be found in the individual stories of those who lived through it: stories of courage and comradeship, and perseverance, of understanding and forgiveness and, ultimately, reconciliation." Moments later, the series concludes with the filmmakers' admonition, channeled through The Beatles, that we, the American viewers, need to "Let It Be."

Burns's and Novick's unsubtle message is that they have just given us their definitive film history of the Vietnam War, that we have now learned enough from the "meaning" found in "the individual stories" to see that the war was, in essence, a "tragedy." Armed with this knowledge, viewers should be prepared to "let it be," to put the war behind them, at last. In an interview, Burns said the film's use of "Let It Be" is "about an ultimate reconciliation" that he hoped the film could facilitate.¹ After 10 episodes of toggling between deeply affective personal stories and overly simplistic analysis of wartime policy and politics, it is hard not to worry about how many millions of PBS viewers fell for this "ultimate reconciliation" charade.

One certainly cannot accuse Burns and Novick of failing the test of the famous anti-war priest, Daniel Berrigan, to "know where you stand, and stand there." By Berrigan's measure, citizens had a responsibility to be informed about and to stand either for or against the Vietnam War, stand either for or against peace. Burns and Novick reject any such choice, but they certainly know where they stand: above us. And, boy, do they stand there, talking down to the audience the way parents speak to children who ask too many questions. Ian Parker, profiling Burns recently in the *New Yorker*, describes the director's "default conversational" mode as "Commencement Address."² No wonder.

For all their desire for historical and moral clarity, Burns and Novick give us a version of the Vietnam War that is as muddy as the Mekong River. The promotional material stresses the banal point that "There is No Single Truth in War." Yet problems of proportion, emphasis, and voice obscure many of the central questions surrounding the war – the very questions that must be resolved if the nation is ever to achieve the kind of "ultimate reconciliation" the filmmakers seem to promise.

The sins of commission and omission are powerfully evident in the inaugural episode. Episode 1 is entitled "Déjà Vu," signaling that everything the French experienced in the First Indochina War predicted the American experience. It aims to cover the context for American intervention up to the Kennedy administration. Yet Burns and Novick take

little more than an hour to skip through French colonialism, the origins of Vietnamese nationalism, the ascendance of Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh, the Second World War, the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence, the subsequent French War, the Geneva Accords of 1954, the establishment of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), and the Eisenhower administration's support for its oligarchic leader, Ngo Dinh Diem.

Later episodes spend more than an hour on periods of only six months. So why skip over thousands of years of Vietnamese history, marked by sustained resistance to foreign incursion and subjugation, and give such tiny shrift to the vital period between the Roosevelt and Kennedy administrations? As "Vietnam: A Television History" demonstrated in the 1980s, a few minutes of context on Vietnam's long history goes a long way to helping the viewer to understand the essential historical and cultural contexts that American policy-makers – whose fatal ignorance was exposed in the Pentagon Papers – would have done well to learn in the 1950s and 1960s.

In fact, the film makes little reference to American ignorance and intervention in the Truman and Eisenhower years. A quick mention of the damage that McCarthyism did to the State Department, by driving talented analysts out, might have helped viewers understand why the Americans made such fundamental errors in judging Ho Chi Minh.³ More important is the complete absence of any discussion of deliberate American subversion of the Geneva Accords. Although photos of Colonel Edward Lansdale with Ngo Dinh Diem appear later in the first episode, Lansdale's name and role in undermining the Geneva Accords is never mentioned.

Instead, Burns, Novick, and screenwriter Geoffrey Ward subtly lay the foundation for a civil war narrative as the dominant frame of the conflict in Vietnam. They quickly gloss over key terms of the Geneva Accords – mentioning the temporary division at the 17th parallel and the unification elections planned for 1956 – while leaving out the express prohibition against Vietnamese on all sides accepting aid of any kind from third-party nations. Had the filmmakers dealt with Lansdale in depth, viewers would know that the CIA took up a sustained campaign of psychological warfare in the months immediately after the Geneva Accords were signed and were instrumental in shoring up Diem's autocratic regime in South Vietnam. Burns and Novick seem to suggest that US intervention during the Eisenhower years sprang from true-believer anti-communism and can-do American spirit – an idealism that got policy-makers in over their heads. It is hard to square this gloss of idealism with the fact that the administration was intentionally violating an international agreement and deliberately working against a democratic solution.

Here, the filmmakers' foregrounding of certain voices betrays their ham-fisted approach to vital historical themes and episodes. First, we get Duong Van Mai, daughter of a Vietnamese mandarin, characterizing the war as a civil war that tore apart families like hers. Her sister stayed in North Vietnam while she and the rest of her family moved to the South to avoid expected persecution. But her story is far from representative. It was plainly not a civil war when, as Dwight Eisenhower estimated, 80% of Vietnamese north and south of the DMZ would have supported a single government under Ho Chi Minh. The idea of a civil war was manufactured by the Americans, but Burns and Novick unquestioningly present it as the organic structure of the conflict. Second, Leslie Gelb's preposterous claim toward the end of Episode 1 that the United States became the "victim of Diem" goes completely unchallenged. Gelb, who worked in the Pentagon under Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, says that Diem was "our master" and "started to boss us around." Diem was many things, but he was never the "master" of the Americans, and only a partisan could get away with claiming that American policy-makers were "victims" with a straight face (after all, the Americans gave the green light to the coup that killed Diem and his brother when, finally, they had become too much of a perceived liability). There is

a vast body of scholarship on US relations with the Diem government, but the complexity of that relationship is here paved over with these lines from Gelb.⁴ The documentary's contention is that American policy in Vietnam was being shaped by coercion from this outside and outsized personality, but that is not an argument that any serious student or scholar of the war would accept. So why do Burns and Novick accept it?

Indeed, the primary source of both the film's virtues and failings are decisions that privilege certain voices over others. In some cases, mostly with American and Vietnamese combat veterans, those choices pay off. The experience of Saratoga Springs's Denton "Mogie" Crocker and his family is recounted by his mother and sister across two episodes with affecting intensity. Crocker, the bookworm son of a biology professor father, had been moved, like so many of his generation, by John F. Kennedy's call to service. He wanted to "be part of something important, and brave," his mother remembers. After running away from home for four months because his mother and father would not let him enlist, his parents finally relented. We get to hear from Mogie himself, via smart, insightful letters sent home. We therefore feel profound sympathy for his mother and sister when they describe learning of Mogie's death, on his 19th birthday, in Vietnam's Central Highlands.

One is also easily moved by the story of Hal Kushner, a 26-year-old doctor captured by the Viet Cong when his helicopter slammed into a mountain in bad weather. The enemy marched him wounded and bootless through the jungle, mostly at night, for a month, until he finally received treatment in a hospital. Burns and Novick make use of him as a voice of the prisoners of war – he was held prisoner for more than five years, tortured, and forced to record a statement against the war – all the way through American withdrawal from Vietnam. Kushner, choking up years later, describes coming home wanting only "a Coke with crushed ice and some chewing gum." As Kushner recounts his return home, Burns and Novick invert Francis Ford Coppola's blaring of Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries" in *Apocalypse Now* by punching up the volume on Ray Charles's version of "America, the Beautiful." Fortunately, Kushner's humanity and the sheer pathos of what he recounts outweigh the directors' cheap musical manipulation.

Although far fewer Vietnamese veterans are interviewed in the film, their stories are equally poignant. In spite of giving the partisan Duong Van Mai Elliott more time than any of the other Vietnamese – she is the only one to speak English throughout – we still get Nguyen Van Tong telling the story of his brother Nguyen Than Hoang, who died early in the war working as a political officer in the Viet Cong. Tong recalls how happy his mother had been to meet his brother's fiancée, her future daughter-in-law, before he was killed, and how the fiancée, rather than marry another man took her own life instead. The sweeping sense of pain, suffering, relief, familial love, sacrifice, and loss among the Vietnamese at the end of the war is as stirring as anything in the film. Here, Burns and Novick must be commended for including in their narrative of the war indispensable voices, namely those of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese combatants, often left out of American accounts.

Unfortunately, the intellectual and emotional value of privileging veterans' voices is offset by the seemingly haphazard selection of other interviewees. When one reporter asked Burns how they went about choosing the more than 80 people interviewed for the film, he replied: "You read. You call up. You think they'd be a good interview." He reported that when one person made interesting comments on the film during a visit to the editing room, they decided to interview that person. "A lot of it is serendipity," Burns remarked.⁵ Actually, a lot of it is laziness. This completely unsystematic approach to the history of the Vietnam War can only be described as lazy, particularly when we know that it was supported by the seemingly boundless resources of corporate donors over more than 10 years. The production quality of the film, so visually arresting, is obviously the product of

the kind of impressively thorough research in photographic and film archives that should have been applied as much to the oral histories.

Consequently, the film gives a disproportionate level of attention to the voices of American *combat* veterans, even though, as Meredith Lair has reminded us, the majority of Americans who served in Vietnam served in non-combat roles.⁶ And instead of hearing from the average clerk or grunt, we get the highly educated, articulate veteran in depth: Hal Kushner, the doctor; Mogie Crocker, the son of the biology professor; novelists Tim O'Brien, Philip Caputo, and Karl Marlantes; and poet Bill Ehrhardt. All are white men. Even though the narrator notes that the draft-fed military that went to Vietnam "heavily skewed toward minorities and the underprivileged," only one African-American veteran and one Japanese-American veteran get any significant airtime across more than one episode; the one Latino who gets more than a few minutes is Everett Alvarez, the first pilot shot down over North Vietnam. Perhaps most shockingly, only one American woman veteran makes an appearance, and it is too brief, given what we have learned from the path-breaking work of scholars such as Heather Stur, Kara Dixon Vuic, Susan Jeffords, Charissa Threat, and others on the role of women in the war.⁷

If there is any advantage to focusing so heavily on this kind of intellectual class of veterans, it is that many of the veterans do the double-duty of providing antiwar voices as well. As Maurice Isserman noted when the film came out, the civilian antiwar movement is overshadowed and otherwise reduced to caricature throughout the film.⁸ The almost exclusive reliance on activist Bill Zimmerman as the voice of the antiwar movement is indefensible. Doing justice to a social and political force as vast and complex as the antiwar movement requires multiple voices. Though Zimmerman provides some insight on campus peace activism and the New Left, he offers nothing, for example, on the enormous numbers of Americans who joined organizations like Mothers Against the War, Women Strike for Peace, the Committee for Nonviolent Action, Quaker and other religious groups, draft resistance organizations, Business Executives Against the War, etc. Burns and Novick repeatedly paint cartoonish versions of campus radicals, with Zimmerman often helpfully playing the hapless kid who puts the puck in his own net by criticizing the movement of which he was a part in terms that only hawks will cheer.

At one point, Zimmerman – who is prone to sweeping generalizations – advances the utterly false claim that the military was so desperate for men in 1966 that the Selective Service started drafting college students. This goes unchallenged, it seems, because the filmmakers drive home Zimmerman's equally dubious conclusion that, as a result of college kids being drafted, the antiwar movement shifted from being "a moral movement to a self-interest movement." This is nonsense stacked upon nonsense. If anything, escalating draft calls created an opportunity for the peace movement, with thousands of men risking imprisonment for openly resisting the draft and inviting prosecution (despite, in countless cases, having student deferments). And anyone who has read *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* or Amy Swerdlow's book on Women Strike for Peace – to take just two counter examples – knows that the peace movement never stopped being "a moral movement."⁹ But thanks to the directors' essentially arbitrary interviewee selection process, viewers never learn any of this.

We may nonetheless be grateful to Burns and Novick for including veterans' antiwar voices. From John Musgrave, especially, viewers are reminded that the war could turn a patriotic Marine, who nearly died from wounds sustained in combat in Vietnam, into an organizer for Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Early in the film, Musgrave serves as a Ron Kovic-like figure – the son of a World War II veteran, a gung-ho Marine who both hates and respects the Vietnamese. Over time, in the couple of years after he was wounded, Musgrave turned against the war and joined the throngs of veterans who threw their

medals over the fence at the Capitol in 1971. “I served my country as honorably when I was in Vietnam Veterans Against the War as I did as a United States Marine,” Musgrave says in Episode 9. “And in fact, I conducted myself as a Marine when I was in VVAW. My whole life I conducted myself as a Marine.” It is a welcome moment of nuance and complexity in an otherwise too-frequently one-dimensional film.

In these moments, when the old us vs. them/GI vs. protester binaries are broken down, the film shines. Not all of the veterans become antiwar activists, of course, but from many of them we hear criticism of the war’s leaders – from generals to presidents – borne of experience. Army Lieutenant Matt Harrison recalls questioning General William Westmoreland’s representation of battle results, relying on false claims of the numbers of enemy killed as “either out of touch or lying.” Air Force pilot Merrill McPeak (who retired decades later as a decorated Air Force Chief of Staff and is an advisor on the film) dares to say that the United States was on the wrong side of the war and that it is a better country thanks to conflict the war provoked at home. Nurse Jane Furey reports on being one of 100 US personnel who refused to eat Thanksgiving dinner in 1969, in the wake of the Moratorium protests and Richard Nixon’s “Silent Majority” speech. The film includes footage of Furey, angry about losing an 18-year-old patient, telling a reporter that she was fasting to protest “any type of war or hostility that brings needless injury to innocent people.” Just as Vietnam Veterans Against the War brought a level of moral authority to the peace movement, these voices of experience lend their criticism a particular weight, and the film is better for including them.

Still, the filmmakers’ decision to emphasize veterans’ voices of dissent greatly minimizes in the national memory the millions of patriotic Americans who protested the war. Although we are introduced to Eva Jefferson, Northwestern University student body president (and daughter of an African-American GI), in a talk-show confrontation with Vice President Spiro Agnew, she gets a fraction of the screen time given to Zimmerman. The latter returns in Episode 9, after the veterans’ credibility as antiwar activists is established, to play the role of the regretful antiwar militant yet again. “We were doing exactly the wrong thing” at the May Day 1971 protests in Washington, Zimmerman confesses, by adopting radical strategies and tactics which allegedly cost the movement public support. Here again, the film makes it seem as though he is speaking for the whole movement, even though we know that the vast majority of protesters who turned out that day behaved as they always had – peacefully, if also when committing civil disobedience – and were not represented in any way by the handful of violent “crazies” to whom Zimmerman seems to be referring.¹⁰

As the documentary grinds on, one begins to realize that the slapdash approach to recruiting interviewees serves a particular purpose. Indeed, it becomes clear that Burns and Novick have made countless directorial and editorial decisions that not only advance their unrealistic desire for reconciliation but also minimize the responsibility of particular presidents and the United States more generally for what can only be described as crimes against humanity. At the same time, they persistently demonize the enemy, not only by letting partisan interviewee assertions go unchallenged, but also through deliberate wording in the narration. It is not an exaggeration to say that Burns and Novick omit the most damning evidence against the United States while going out of their way to demonstrate the deceit and war crimes of the enemy.

The film’s coverage of critical events in the war’s history – the Tonkin Gulf incidents, the Tet Offensive, the bombing and invasion of Cambodia – generally casts the Johnson and Nixon administrations in comparatively favorable light while casting the Vietnamese enemy unfavorably. Through selective use of Oval Office recordings, Johnson comes off as a sympathetic figure, reluctant to expand the American commitment in Vietnam. “I don’t

think it's worth fighting for," the president says to McGeorge Bundy, "and I don't think we can get out." It is a remarkably outdated portrayal of Johnson, given that Fredrik Logevall so thoroughly dismantled this war-as-unavoidable argument in *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (2001).

When the film moves to the events of early August 1964, it skims over key details of the context of the Tonkin Gulf incidents that we have known for a long time: above all, the extent and lengthy duration of the Johnson-approved "DeSoto" espionage patrols and OPLAN 34A commando missions that precipitate the "incidents" (the documentary mentions, only vaguely, South Vietnamese "raids" that may have prompted the North Vietnamese to attack the *USS Maddox* on August 2 without clarifying that the raids were, in fact, American-organized OPLAN 34A operations). Both Johnson and Ho Chi Minh are described as shocked to learn of the North Vietnamese retaliation, as if neither were aware of American actions in the Gulf that may have prompted predictable response. The narrator intones, ominously, that no one really knows who ordered the "attacks," but "some believe it was Le Duan," as if it were the unprovoked aggression of a madman. Indeed, by this point, in Episode 3, the film is beginning to set up Le Duan, the First Secretary of the Communist Party, as a kind of North Vietnamese Voldemort (with Ho cast as Dumbledore), complete with grainy photos of Le Duan and repeated use of a gloomy panning shot of the outside of the politburo building in the Hanoi rain.

The narration rightly tells viewers that no second attack occurred on August 4, but in strangely passive voice suggests that President Johnson ordered retaliatory strikes and sought the support of Congress because he believed the United States had been attacked, unprovoked, again. The narrator reads: "The attack was 'probable, but not certain,' Johnson was told." And "since it had 'probably' occurred, the president decided it should not go unanswered." This cryptic use of the passive voice lets Johnson and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara off the hook. In fact, by the time Johnson went on national television to announce retaliatory strikes against North Vietnam, McNamara knew that reports of a second "attack" had been called into question. Both men knew that the August 2 attack was not "unprovoked"; CIA Director James McCone told the president that it could not be seen as aggression as much as self-defense. This is an absolutely crucial part of the history of the American war, the point at which the president gets authorization from Congress, with the support of the American people, to escalate the war on the basis of lies and distortions. Surely, it deserves deeper exploration and clearer conclusions about who, exactly, lied and distorted.¹¹

Screenwriter Geoffrey Ward's narrative of the Tet Offensive further seeks to cast Johnson sympathetically while making the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese seem like savages. It follows recordings of Johnson ripping the media for its coverage – "your press is lying like drunken sailors every day," he shouts into the telephone – by suggesting that the media focused only on Saigon, not "everywhere" else. "Most assaults were being quickly beaten back by ARVN and American forces," Coyote narrates. "Everywhere the enemy was suffering terrible losses." True or not, the filmmakers miss the forest for the trees: American battlefield success did not matter when the scale of the Tet Offensive destroyed the credibility of an administration that had just recently been claiming that it could see victory just around the corner. To American television viewers, the sight of enemy commandos *inside* the US Embassy compound in Saigon did not look like imminent victory.

Like a poker player who gives away his hand with a "tell," Burns, Novick, and Ward have, by the time we reach the Tet Offensive, given away that they are rigging the history of the war. The narration intones that during the Tet Offensive, "Viet Cong assassination squads, some guided by North Vietnamese spies, moved through the streets with orders to kill what they called 'blood enemies of the people': bureaucrats, intelligence officers,

ARVN commanders, and ordinary soldiers, home on leave, and their families.” It is a question of emphasis. The possibility that the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese may have thought of themselves as the latest in a long line of patriots attempting to repel yet another foreign invader is not mentioned by the narrator. That would not necessarily excuse these horrific acts but it would help explain them. Instead, Ward makes the Vietnamese enemy into cold-blooded assassins.

The fighting in the city of Hue during the Tet Offensive is used to further this narrative of the barbaric enemy. Peter Coyote recites gloomily that “after 26 days of bitter, bloody fighting,” when ARVN and American forces reclaimed control of the old imperial capital, “the surviving North Vietnamese and Viet Cong were finally permitted by their commanders to pull out of the city.” The word choice here is telling. Ward could have written, more benignly, that “the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong finally withdrew.” The effect of “finally permitted by their commanders” is to suggest that those enemy commanders were unhinged, prepared to kill many of their own for negligible gain.

In the following episode, Ward returns to portraying Le Duan and North Vietnamese commanders as reckless with their troops’ lives, even as some young men evaded service. “The more young people were lost there, the more they sent,” Coyote reads. But “the sons of some party officials and their friends were sent abroad to escape the draft; university students were exempted; people with money bribed recruiters to overlook their offspring or paid physicians to declare them unfit to serve.” As a result, “most draftees were poor people from the countryside, especially receptive to the slogans and promises of the revolution.” Of course, almost the exact same things could be said of Americans, but it is decidedly *not* said. In the brief discussion of the American draft in Episode 4, viewers see fleeting images of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, representing many who successfully evaded service in Vietnam, but they are not identified by name, nor are their stories discussed. Why the unequal treatment? The fact that American fathers pulled strings to keep their sons from being sent to Vietnam or paid psychiatrists or doctors to declare them mentally or physically impaired gets no mention at all.

Nowhere is the filmmakers’ unequal treatment of the Americans and their Vietnamese enemy more obvious than in the discussions of atrocities committed by both sides. Whereas the coverage of the Tet Offensive concludes with evidence of the North Vietnamese Army’s killing of civilians – perhaps as many as 2800 – as it retreated from Hue, including one Vietnamese veteran acknowledging that it was a “massacre,” an “atrocity,” the scale of American atrocities is minimized. Upon introducing the My Lai massacre, Peter Coyote narrates that

the killing of civilians has happened in every war. In Vietnam, it was not [American] policy or routine, but it was not an aberration, either. Still, the scale and deliberateness and intimacy of what happened at My Lai were different.

If we start with the facts that more than three million Vietnamese were killed during the American war (Robert McNamara was in the habit of using 3.4 million) and that only approximately one million of them were combatants, then we can say pretty definitively that killing of civilians in Vietnam was routine and a product of American policy. Most of those deaths resulted, as Neil Sheehan points out in the film, from American aircraft dropping bombs in both the North and South. In contrast, the massacre of more than 500 civilians by a single American company, over four hours, in March 1968 at My Lai was “different” from the killing of civilians from the air. The point is so obvious, why make it? It is a deflection – a way of making My Lai seem utterly aberrant, the work of a few bad apples in one bad company with bad leaders.

When the film gets to John Kerry, representing Vietnam Veterans Against the War before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and he reports on the regularity of

American war crimes, Burns and Novick allow one of their veteran interviewees, Phil Gioia, to flatly dispute Kerry. Gioia acknowledges that there were “a couple of units that went right off the rails,” but says that war crimes were not widespread in the way that Kerry made it seem. Too bad that Gioia is completely wrong. Anyone who has read Bernd Greiner’s or Nick Turse’s work on American atrocities knows that a big part of what distinguished My Lai was simply the press attention it received and the investigation that attention prompted.¹² Both scholars have shown how routine and regular was the American torture and killing of Vietnamese civilians, maybe as much as “a My Lai each month,” according to a source uncovered by Turse, over a period of at least a year.¹³ But why rely on years of research conducted by a prize-winning journalist and historian, when the unsubstantiated opinion of a single veteran will do?

At no point in the film does the question of the scale of killing in Vietnam reach the White House. Just as Burns and Novick treat Lyndon Johnson as a largely sympathetic, tragic figure, they go remarkably easy on Richard Nixon. In describing Nixon’s introduction of “Vietnamization” – turning over the ground war to the ARVN so that Americans could begin to come home – the film states that the president was “redefining what victory would look like.” Marine Corps veteran Tom Vallely (also an advisor on the film) then says that Nixon’s strategy aimed to find a way to surrender “without saying they surrender.” “This is not a bad strategy,” Vallely says. “It’s the *only* strategy!” Here again, however, the opinion of a veteran does not square with the historical record, and the film suffers because of it.

Burns and Novick seem to have missed the point that Vietnamization was a sham, a distraction designed to convince the American public that their new president was winding down the Vietnam War even as he was, in secret, expanding it. Indeed, one of the most shocking failures of the film is its almost complete lack of coverage of Nixon spreading the war into Cambodia. No scholar of the war has taken Nixon at his “peace with honor” word for more than 30 years. As documented by Larry Berman, Arnold Isaacs, and others, Nixon believed he could yet win the war, particularly if he could take out enemy supply lines and staging areas in Cambodia.¹⁴ Strangely, the filmmakers make little of Nixon’s secret MENU bombings (the 15 month-long campaign of illegal bombing of targets in Cambodia) or the precise lengths to which Nixon and Henry Kissinger went to keep them secret. There is no mention of how this sustained bombing destabilized Cambodia, contributed to anti-government sentiment, and furthered the rise of the genocidal Khmer Rouge. Later, the film covers Nixon’s ground invasion of Cambodia, but calls it an “incursion,” and takes the president pretty much at his word in his justifications for the invasion and his claims of its success two months later. The scale of devastation wrought on the Cambodian people as a result of Richard Nixon’s policies is incalculable, yet this chapter of the Vietnam War passes by so quickly, it does not even reach the level of “sideshow” (journalist William Shawcross’s term for describing how the Nixon administration and the American people thought of Cambodia at the time).¹⁵

When Americans tune-in to watch the latest Ken Burns–Lynn Novick historical documentary on PBS, they expect to be educated. Burns and Novick are so widely celebrated (and certainly funded) as the nation’s leading documentarians – historian Christian Appy has noted that there is no other person in our culture “who has a greater influence on public memory of U.S. history” than Burns – that, whether they like it or not, they are seen as public intellectuals and arch-curators of American history itself. But as intellectuals, they bear a particular responsibility. “It is the responsibility of intellectuals,” Noam Chomsky famously wrote at the height of the Vietnam War, “to speak the truth and to expose lies.”¹⁶ Intellectuals, Chomsky argued, are in the best position to marshal evidence, to make coherent, defensible analysis, to argue with each other, and to present conclusions to the rest of us. In *The Vietnam War*, Ken Burns and Lynne Novick plainly abdicate the full measure

of this responsibility, even as they provide an absorbing and at times heart-wrenching account of America's ugliest war.

It is an abdication of responsibility to say, as the master frame for the Vietnam conflict, that "there is no single truth in war" – and thereby validate subjective "truths" that are in reality falsehoods. We know that there are many truths before we even see the film (thanks to Tim O'Brien and *The Things They Carried*, we know that fiction can be truer than truth). Thanks to robust historical scholarship and journalism, we know that the war was not simply "a tragedy," that it was not "begun in good faith, by decent people, out of fateful misunderstanding." We know that it was made by policy-makers who deliberated and decided, first, to prop up a French colonial power against the will of the overwhelming Vietnamese majority and, second, to subvert an international agreement intended to bring self-determination to the Vietnamese people. We know that multiple administrations, Republican and Democrat, built a South Vietnamese state run by thugs who could not win a fair election among their own people. We know that Kennedy and Johnson had opportunities to get out of Vietnam, but did not take them. We know that Johnson escalated the war and sold it to the American public on the basis of false and misleading information. And we know that Richard Nixon expanded the war through an illegal bombing campaign in Cambodia, even as he lied to the public about seeking "peace with honor." We know that while there were some firebrands among those who opposed the war, the vast majority of American dissenters thought of themselves as patriots, distraught over the government's abandonment of core American values.

Instead of dwelling on these truths, the filmmakers conclude their sprawling documentary by returning to the theme of reconciliation. Using a number of examples of apparent closure and resolution, they press us toward putting the war behind us: Maya Lin's controversial design of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC serves as a national reckoning carved into black granite; there have been moments of exchange and dialogue among veterans on all sides of the war, including Americans contributing to efforts to clear the unexploded ordnance that still litters the Vietnamese countryside; and the governments of the United States and Vietnam are now in their third decade of normalized relations, including cooperation on trade that seemed inconceivable a generation before. These meaningful attempts at reconciliation are real and significant, but they are not enough. And it is not sufficient for filmmakers whose stated aim is to move us toward reconciliation to simply recount these stories and then tell us to "let it be."

The starting point for any process of reconciliation, for any process that results in Americans coming to terms with the trauma of the Vietnam War, has to be a direct reckoning with the fact that the war itself was a crime against humanity. The Nuremberg principles – first articulated by American lawyers in the prosecution of Nazi war criminals – include language defining "wanton destruction of cities, towns, or villages or devastation not justified by military necessity" as war crimes and "murder, extermination . . . and other inhuman acts done against any civilian population . . . when such acts are done . . . in connection with any crime against peace or any war crime" as crimes against humanity.¹⁷ Had any other nation engaged in the sustained and disproportionate violence that the United States unleashed on the civilian population in Vietnam, American lawyers might again have led the international community in prosecuting the civilian and military officials responsible. Indeed, if there is a "tragedy" in the history of America's war in Vietnam, it is that 30 years of intervention there somehow dragged the United States down from being one of the world's leading promoters of universal human rights to one of the world's worst violators of human rights. There can be no surprise that in recent years the United States has started an aggressive war, continued to kill civilians from the sky, and committed itself to torture and indefinite detention, setting rules for itself that it


once would not have tolerated from its enemies. An 18-hour-long film, produced by the nation's highest profile documentarians, with the express goal of facilitating reconciliation, must, in the first place, confront this reality and its legacy head-on.

Psychologists and other researchers of trauma have long warned of the dangers of repressing trauma. It is better to face the ugly truth, to confront it, to understand it, before attempting to “move on.” In fact, “moving on” is impossible without first facing the trauma. Many other nations have had to face their own horrific pasts. In Germany, South Africa, Argentina, Guatemala, and many other countries, citizens eventually confronted the shocking acts perpetrated by their governments in their names or by large swaths of their own populations. In some cases, Truth and Reconciliation commissions brought together both the architects of state violence and their victims as a way to register accountability and facilitate closure. As these examples have made clear, it *is* possible for a nation to wrestle with its ugly past in a way that is responsible and productive, in a way that at least reconciles historical memory with the horrible historical truth.

Any credible “closure” or “reconciliation” over the American war in Vietnam must be predicated on a profound, honest, and self-critical reckoning with the wrongfulness of the cause and the terrible prosecution of the war. At a minimum, we need to stop telling lies and spinning myths about it, no matter how polyvalent and sophisticated the telling might be. To be fair to Burns and Novick, it is unlikely that any film could reconcile the profound divisions over the Vietnam War because, for some Americans, they are simply irreconcilable. But for those who were too young to have lived through that period and for all of the Americans and Vietnamese born in the future, what we need is more morally honest and empirically truthful representations of the war – the kind that step outside persisting assumptions of American exceptionalism, good intentions, and honorable war-making.

If Americans could ever make an honest reckoning over the crimes of the Vietnam War, perhaps then they could move beyond what Burns has called the “stew of anger and recrimination” dividing the country and focus their reconciliation efforts where it really matters – on Vietnam. It is one thing to confront the trauma that the Vietnam War produced in the United States, but it is another to confront the trauma that American violence produced in Vietnam. The efforts Americans have put in to try to clean up unexploded mines and bombs still threatening the Vietnamese today is admirable, but it is nothing approaching the scale of reparations the Vietnamese deserve for the millions of lives lost in the American war (to say nothing of the environmental and human devastation, still visible in Vietnam, from the millions of gallons of chemical defoliants used by the United States during the war). In short, Americans need to find a way to overcome their own trauma so that they can make amends for the horrors their governments let loose on the Vietnamese.

One can imagine a film being at the center of these national conversations – in the way that *Roots* prompted a national conversation about the history of American slavery – but Ken Burns's and Lynne Novick's *The Vietnam War* is not that film. We need a film history that does not tell us to “let it be,” but that brings us to the point where we are, as a nation, prepared ourselves to “let it be” only after integrating a deep understanding of the war into a sense of who we are as a nation. We still have a long way to go.

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Notes

1. Alyssa Rosenberg, “‘The American War’: You’ve watched all 18 h of ‘The Vietnam War.’ Here’s what Ken Burns wants you to remember,” *Washington Post* online, September 29, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/act-four/wp/2017/09/29/the-american-war-youve-watched-all-18-hours-of-the-vietnam-war-heres-what-ken-burns-wants-you-to-remember/?utm_term=.e6d1f1e903cb
2. Ian Parker, “Ken Burns’s American Canon,” *New Yorker*, September 4, 2017. Available online at: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/09/04/ken-burns-american-canon>
3. Robert McNamara laments the loss of talent in the McCarthy era State Department purges in his memoir. See McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 32–3.
4. See, for example, Duiker, *U. S. Containment Policy*; Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 100–13; Miller, *Misalliance*; and Fear, “Ambiguous Legacy.”
5. “Ken Burns, Lynn Novick” *Vietnam*, October 2017, 18. Available online at: <https://www.scribd.com/document/363709356/Vietnam-October-2017>
6. Lair, *Armed with Abundance*.
7. Stur, *Beyond Combat*; Vuic, *Officer, Nurse, Woman*; Jeffords, *Remasculinization of America*; and Threat, *Nursing Civil Rights*.
8. Maurice Isserman, “Give Peace a Chance,” *Dissent* (Fall 2017). Available online at: <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/ken-burns-lynn-novick-vietnam-war-review>
9. Berrigan, *Trial of the Catonsville Nine*; and Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*.
10. It is possible, of course, that Zimmerman, the author of a thoughtful memoir of his activism in the 1960s, provided a much more sophisticated interpretation of the antiwar movement when Burns and Novick interviewed him and that they quote him selectively or even out of context. It would be nice to know if they plan to deposit their interviews in an appropriate archive.
11. The most thorough examination of the Tonkin Gulf crisis is Moïse, *Tonkin Gulf*. But even before Moïse’s book, the key details were covered in major books on the war: Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 118; Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 150–1; McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 122–35; Buzzanco, *Masters of War*, 168–72; and Langguth, *Our Vietnam*, 299–303.
12. Greiner, *War Without Fronts*; and Turse, *Kill Anything that Moves*.
13. Nick Turse, “A My Lai Month,” *The Nation*, November 13, 2008. Available online at: <https://www.thenation.com/article/my-lai-month/>. See also, Turse, *Kill Anything that Moves*, 215.
14. Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*; and Isaacs, *Without Honor*.
15. Shawcross, *Sideshow*.
16. Noam Chomsky, “The Responsibility of Intellectuals,” *New York Review of Books*, February 23, 1967. Available online at: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1967/02/23/a-special-supplement-the-responsibility-of-intelle/>
17. United Nations, “Principles of International Law Recognized in the Charter of the Nürnberg Tribunal and in the Judgment of the Tribunal,” 1950. Available online at: legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/draft_articles/7_1_1950.pdf.

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