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VIETNAMESE MIND

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

SACEI 2017 Man of the Year—Stephen Sherman	1
A Warped Mirror	2
The Vietnam War Documentary: Doom and Despair	6
The Bad War	9
Ride the Thunder: based on Richard Botkin's book	19

SAIGON ARTS, CULTURE & EDUCATION INSTITUTE



To Research, Document & Promote Vietnamese-American Culture

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The 2017 SACEI Man of the Year Stephen Sherman



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A Warped Mirror *Mark Moyar*

<https://www.city-journal.org/html/warped-mirror-15531.html>

October 20, 2017

Twenty-seven years ago, Ken Burns mesmerized American audiences with *The Civil War*, an 11-hour documentary that took five years to produce. Forty million Americans watched the initial airing, and many more watched reruns or read the companion book. The series rekindled popular interest in the Civil War, stimulating a flood of books and battle reenactments that continues to this day.

Burns and co-director Lynn Novick spent ten years and \$30 million producing *The Vietnam War*, an 18-hour, ten-episode production. Anyone tuning in to media coverage or attending one of the public panels featuring Burns and Novick is likely to conclude that the new documentary has equaled *The Civil War* in historical and artistic virtuosity. But if one listens to American or South Vietnamese veterans of the conflict—more easily heard today, thanks to the Internet—the verdicts are less complimentary.

During the months-long publicity blitz preceding the documentary's release, Burns and Novick vowed that *The Vietnam War* would not malign American veterans of Vietnam or blame them for the war, as had happened so often in the past. Instead, the film would portray veterans as patriotic Americans who answered their nation's call to duty. The documentary would support the troops, without necessarily supporting the war. As for the war itself, the production would not promote a particular viewpoint. "We don't have an agenda," Burns told the media. "We're just umpires calling balls and strikes." So why aren't veterans as enthused about *The Vietnam War* as they should be?

The foremost reason is that Burns and Novick are not actually impartial referees, but instead use the documentary to promote an agenda, in ways glaringly obvious to veterans though not readily apparent to those too young to have lived through the war. Burns and Novick wish to show that America fought a war that was unnecessary and unwinnable, and that it did so out of national hubris.

With the consistency of a jackhammer, the documentary highlights the events most conducive to a negative interpretation of American involvement, while ignoring those supporting more positive interpretations. During 1962 and 1963, for instance, the Vietnamese Communists lost nearly every battle, yet the only battle from this period that Burns and Novick cover is the Communist victory at Ap Bac. Compounding the distortion, the documentary characterizes Ap Bac as historically representative.

During 1966 and 1967, American forces inflicted hundreds of lopsided defeats on the North Vietnamese, but the six battles that Burns and Novick feature in the episodes devoted to those years belong to a small minority of engagements where both the American and North Vietnamese forces suffered heavy losses. In the battles that it covers, the documentary takes little note of the heroism of American veterans, aside from a few fleeting references. Nothing is said of the 259 Americans who won the Congressional Medal of Honor, or the tens of thousands who won other combat awards, or the many more whose valor was recognized only by their comrades. It's as if a football team won 150 games, tied 10, and lost 2 over seven seasons, but its video chronicler focused only on the ties and losses. The players on that team would hardly be expected to view that videographer as their supporter, no matter how much he professed to be one, and no matter how often he claimed to have no agenda.

U.S. Army and Marine Corps officers generally committed more errors in the battles where the Americans sustained the most casualties; Burns and Novick consistently emphasize these errors as evidence that American military leaders were inept. John Del Vecchio, one of the finest novelists of the Vietnam War, blasted Burns and Novick for vilifying American officers in his [online rebuttal](#) of the documentary. "I wish here to openly thank leaders and commanders of 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) units from platoons to brigades for their leadership which was so vastly superior to what I've seen portrayed by Mr. Burns and Ms. Novick," Del Vecchio wrote. "Surely I was blessed to soldier under such NCOs and officers."

Continue on next page

A Warped Mirror...

Burns and Novick restricted their on-camera interviews to individuals who participated in the war, leaving out historians, aside from those who were also veterans. The first-person perspectives are highly valuable, but sole reliance upon them is problematic when it comes to larger issues of military strategy and politics. Most of the senior military and political leaders are now dead, and thus unable to respond to criticisms from the narrator, or from people who observed the war on the ground—where they could see the trees but not necessarily the forest.

Among the disgruntled veterans featured so prominently by Burns and Novick, a favorite complaint is the fighting of battles for terrain that gets abandoned after the Americans gain control of it. The veteran of a fierce hill fight says, “To take tops of mountains in the triple canopy jungle along the Cambodian-Laotian border accomplished nothing of any importance.” Fighting for remote mountains made sense, though, if one took into account the constraints that U.S. political leadership imposed upon the war. President Lyndon Johnson prohibited his generals from conducting ground operations in Cambodia, Laos, and North Vietnam, based primarily on fears of Chinese intervention in the conflict. Given this prohibition, the U.S. had to choose between fighting for the remote hills or waiting for the North Vietnamese to move into the populous regions closer to the coast. Experience showed that when the North Vietnamese came near the population, the presence of civilians greatly impeded the use of American air power and artillery, to such an extent that defeating the North Vietnamese was at least as costly as defeating them in remote areas. The fears that drove Johnson to confine the ground war to South Vietnam proved to be misplaced, according to what we have since learned about Chinese foreign policy and North Vietnamese strategy. The Chinese, it turns out, were not willing to intervene in North Vietnam or Laos, as they had done in North Korea in 1950. General Vo Nguyen Giap reportedly said that if the United States had conducted operations in Laos and North Vietnam, it could have stymied Hanoi’s war effort with 250,000 troops—less than half of what the United States ultimately deployed. It’s one of several instances where poor decisions by U.S. political leaders squandered opportunities to preserve South Vietnam at an acceptable cost. Other errors include the overthrow of Diem in 1963 and the breaking of promises to support and protect South Vietnam after 1972. The war’s outcome was not the inevitable result of superior North Vietnamese dedication or American arrogance, as Burns and Novick would have us believe, but of errant U.S. strategic choices—and, in the last case, the antiwar sentiments of American members of Congress.

Veterans also object to the production’s favorable depiction of antiwar activists. Burns and Novick lead the audience to believe that the men who stayed home and protested against the war were as well-intentioned as those who served in Vietnam, and were actually supporting the better cause. Their opposition is presented as principled revulsion at the war, untainted by selfish desires to avoid the dangers of military service. Veteran Charles Krohn, [writing about the ninth episode](#) as a guest contributor on Tom Ricks’s Best Defense blog, lamented that the episode “favors those who opposed the war more than those who fought it. Soldiers’ sacrifices seem trivialized, compared to the energy and idealism of the demonstrators.”

Burns and Novick give inordinate weight to the words of antiwar veterans, with at least one-third of those appearing onscreen having expressed antiwar views or supported antiwar causes prior to filming. Few of the series’ other veterans express support for the war—at least not in the interview segments that were aired—even though supporters far outnumber opponents among the general population of Vietnam veterans. This distortion rankled the veterans whom reporter Tatiana Sanchez interviewed for a *Mercury News* [article](#). “A lot of us have a tremendous sense of pride for what we attempted to do and defend,” said veteran Jim Barker. On the *New York Sun* website, veteran and author Phil Jennings [berates](#) Burns for failing to include the huge numbers of veterans who “wholly supported the war, [were] proud to have appeared in arms, and sickened by the United States’ abandonment of its freedom-seeking ally.”

Many of the antiwar interviewees express disillusionment not only with the American cause in Vietnam but also with the United States more generally. Several state that the Vietnam War convinced them that the concept of American exceptionalism was a fallacy. This theme is a particularly sore point among veterans who believe that they fought in a worthy war for a worthy country. During a [panel discussion](#) on the PBS series at the Center for Strategic and Interna-

Continue on next page

A Warped Mirror...

tional Studies, Vietnam veteran and historian Lewis Sorley said that Burns was “profoundly wrong” for “referring disparagingly to what he called Americans’ ‘puffed-up sense of exceptionalism.’” Sorley added, “Clearly, Burns does not much like America.”

Though Burns and Novick resisted putting historians on screen, they did make use of an historical advisory panel. Consisting almost entirely of scholars on the left, the advisory panel makes its influence felt throughout the production, particularly in those parts read by narrator Peter Coyote (himself an antiwar activist). Reviewers for NPR, NBC, and the *Washington Post* who lavished praise on Burns and Novick for their evenhandedness ignored the panel’s lack of balance; one suspects that they would have taken a different view of a supposedly neutral 18-hour documentary on abortion that relied almost entirely on historians who considered abortion morally repugnant.

One veteran on the advisory panel, James Willbanks, submitted his resignation to Burns several years ago after seeing a preliminary version of the script that merely rehashed the antiwar movement’s narrative. Promising to take his concerns into account, Burns convinced Willbanks to stay on. To his credit, Burns included intermittent statements from Willbanks that provide valuable correctives to the production’s content and tone. Willbanks is seen disputing the notion that the “Tiger Force” atrocities were in any way representative of the conduct of U.S. forces in Vietnam. In the episode covering the 1972 Easter Offensive, Willbanks says that the South Vietnamese ground forces, not just U.S. air power, were essential to the defeat of the North Vietnamese. Unfortunately, these momentary expressions of views prevalent in the veteran community are overwhelmed by countervailing testimony and imagery.

The filmmakers’ bias is most evident in what is omitted. The documentary stresses the Communists’ success in marshalling Vietnamese civilians to move supplies and equipment during the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 but makes no mention of the massive logistical support provided by the Chinese, including 1,000 trucks and tens of thousands of troops. This omission fools viewers into believing that the Vietnamese Communists were self-reliant, in contrast with the anti-Communists, who are depicted as puppets and dependents of the United States.

Narrator Coyote tells us that an international consensus held that Ho Chi Minh would have won a national election had it been held in 1956, as called for in the 1954 Geneva Accords. South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem’s refusal to participate in such elections, therefore, appears to have been an abrogation of the will of the Vietnamese people. What goes unsaid is that most South Vietnamese and American observers believed that Ho would have intimidated the North Vietnamese population into voting for him, which would have guaranteed his victory because the North was more populous than the South. In a subsequent segment, Burns and Novick criticize the Diem government for manipulating elections and winning 98 percent of the vote, but they’re silent on the North’s equally flagrant election-rigging.

The documentary accuses Diem of sending troops to round up Buddhists at their pagodas in August 1963, after he had promised to avoid repressive measures. His heavy-handed duplicity, it seems, precipitated the military coup that took his life. What’s missing here is the crucial fact that Diem authorized these raids at the urging of the same generals who later overthrew him. The generals turned against Diem because Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge and an American press corps led by David Halberstam and Neil Sheehan badly misread the situation and promoted a coup. The film also neglects to mention that the Buddhist protests persisted long after Diem’s death, convincing even their initial American supporters that the militant Buddhists were Communist pawns, rather than selfless champions of religious liberty, as American reporters originally portrayed them.

The episode on 1966 includes clips of a congressional hearing in which diplomat George Kennan, founder of the American containment strategy, expresses doubt about the war’s value in containing Communism. “We would do better,” Kennan says, “if we really would show ourselves a little more relaxed and less terrified of what happens in certain of the smaller countries of Asia and Africa, and not jump around like an elephant frightened by a mouse every time these things occur.” Kennan, the film implies, viewed the war as hopeless, and saw withdrawal as the only viable choice. Most of the film’s heroes, in fact, allegedly recognized early on that the American effort was doomed, reinforcing the aura of inevitability that hangs over the production.

Continue on next page

A Warped Mirror...

In truth, Kennan, like many others, was not adamantly opposed to the war, nor so confident of its outcome. In sections of his testimony that the film does not show, senators press Kennan to explain how the United States could extricate itself from Vietnam without doing great damage to American interests. Kennan acknowledges that he did not favor immediate withdrawal because it could facilitate Communist expansionism in neighboring countries and endanger world peace. He advocates a negotiated settlement that would allow the U.S. to withdraw without giving the appearance of selling out an ally.

In the [most telling exchange](#), Democratic senator Frank Lausche of Ohio confronts Kennan on the question of how negotiations would produce the desired outcome. “Have not the U.S. government and the people of the United States,” asks Lausche, “probed every avenue through which there could be discussion toward reaching a settlement, and has there not been constant rebuttal of those efforts by China and by Hanoi?”

Kennan: “It is correct that we have gotten nowhere.”

When Lausche asks what the Johnson administration should do, Kennan says, “I would propose that we limit our aims and our military commitment in this area, that we decide what we can safely hold in that region with due regard to the security of our forces, that we dig in and wait and see whether possibilities for a solution do not open up.”

“There are many, many people who believe that this is exactly what our nation is trying to do,” Lausche responds.

Burns and Novick further mislead through selective use of tape recordings of the Nixon administration. Those who hear only the excerpts presented here will conclude that, for reasons of political self-interest, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger were planning to stand by the South Vietnamese until the 1972 election and then cut them loose soon thereafter. Historian Luke Nichter, a leading authority on the Nixon tapes, [has faulted](#) Burns and Novick for excerpting “carefully chosen segments of the tapes to fit a preconceived notion, or a larger point sometimes taken out of context, while not giving evidence to the contrary a similar degree of attention.” As Nichter notes, Nixon often expressed multiple positions as he pondered an issue, and many of his words and deeds on the issue of South Vietnam suggested a commitment to the long-term survival of the Saigon government.

The documentary devotes five minutes to the story of the Vietnamese girl Kim Phuc, photographed moments after an errant South Vietnamese napalm strike burned her skin during the 1972 Easter Offensive—one of the war’s iconic images. At the end of the segment, Coyote says that Kim Phuc “eventually left Vietnam and settled outside Toronto.” He does not mention that she fled Vietnam, seeking and obtaining asylum from its repressive Communist regime. A larger historical transgression is the film’s omission of the deliberate killing of civilians by the North Vietnamese during the same offensive. As South Vietnamese civilians fled south from Quang Tri for fear of a massacre like that inflicted by the Communists at Hue in 1968, North Vietnamese troops opened artillery fire on their slow-moving columns. Thousands of civilians were killed or wounded in these attacks. Likewise absent is any mention of the South Vietnamese civilians killed during the 1975 offensive, the estimated 65,000 South Vietnamese killed shortly after the war ended, and the tens of thousands who died in reeducation camps. Burns and Novick repeatedly depict the South Vietnamese military and government as less committed to their cause than their North Vietnamese counterparts. Several interviewees invoke this alleged inferiority to argue that “we supported the wrong side,” evidently without concern that the other side was fighting for the pernicious ideology of Communism. As history has demonstrated repeatedly, commitment to a cause alone does not confer virtue. The Germans were more dedicated than the Poles in 1939 and the French in 1940, but no American would say that the United States should have sided with Nazi Germany.

At one point, Coyote notes that 250,000 South Vietnamese troops were killed in the war, but we’re never told why so many South Vietnamese were willing to die for a government as corrupt and unpopular as the documentary suggests. Whereas Burns and Novick explore the ideology of Ho Chi Minh at length, they ignore the nation-

Continue on next page

A Warped Mirror...

alism and anti-Communism that motivated so many of South Vietnam's leaders to fight to the death for their government. This disinterest in the South Vietnamese cause has galled South Vietnamese veterans as well as the Americans who fought alongside them.

"We, Vietnamese, have a crystal clear understanding of the reasons why we fought," Nguyen van Thai and Nguyen Phuc Lien wrote in a [blistering critique](#) of the PBS series. "We fought because we understood the cruelty and dictatorship of the communists. We fought because we did not wish the communists to impose a barbarous and inhuman regime upon us. More than 1,000,000 people from North Vietnam fled their native land and emigrated to the South in 1954 in order to escape totalitarianism, which is ample evidence for this point. The second exodus of the 70's, 80's and early 90's also corroborated this fact."

The series disregards the Viet Cong's massive loss of support in the war's later years. In 1967, Communist recruitment of South Vietnamese youth began plummeting, and it never recovered. As the war turned increasingly against Hanoi, an estimated 200,000 of those supposedly zealous Communist troops defected to South Vietnam.

While no history of the Vietnam War can fully satisfy everyone, Burns and Novick could have achieved something close to the impartial account they promise, presenting facts and stories within their proper context and including contrasting examples that support the competing schools of thought on the war. They could have refrained from taking sides on controversies like the validity of the domino theory, the moral rectitude of the South Vietnamese government, and the merits of American exceptionalism. They could have sought advice from more than a handful of people who did not share their contempt for the war.

For evidence of what might have been, one need look no further than the [Vietnam War exhibit](#) that opened earlier this month at the New York Historical Society. As someone who served on the exhibit's advisory panel, alongside many people with diametrically opposed viewpoints, I can attest that great effort went into ensuring the exhibit's evenhandedness. Those dissatisfied with the polemical nature of the PBS series will find this treatment a refreshing and fair-minded alternative.

The Vietnam War Documentary: Doom and Despair

by [Bing West](#)

Thursday, October 12, 2017

<https://www.hoover.org/research/vietnam-war-documentary-doom-and-despair>

Ken Burns recently released a documentary entitled "The Vietnam War: An Intimate History." The script concluded with these words, "The Vietnam War was a tragedy, immeasurable and irredeemable."¹ That damning hyperbole neatly summarized 18 hours of haunting, funereal music, doleful tales by lugubrious veterans, and an elegiac historical narration voiced over a collage of violent images and thunderous explosions. In this telling, the anti-war protestors in the States are morally equivalent to the American soldiers who fought the war. Indeed, while the grunts seem soiled by the violence, those who evaded the draft and spat upon those who fought had the added satisfaction of seeing Soviet tanks manned by North Vietnamese soldiers roll triumphantly into Saigon.

A veteran is quoted at the end of the film saying, "We have learned a lesson...that we just can't impose our will on others." While that daffy aphorism sums up the documentary, in real life the opposite is true. Alexander imposed his will upon the Persian empire. Rome indelibly imposed its will upon Carthage. After the Civil War, the Federal govern-

Continue on next page

VN War Documentary...

ment imposed its will upon the Confederacy. Following World War II, we imposed our will upon Nazi Germany and bushido Japan. In 1975, the North Vietnamese Stalinist government imposed its will upon the South Vietnamese. Forty-two years later, that same octogenarian, corrupt communist regime continues to oppress the south, while the country as a whole has become the Cuba of East Asia, bereft of economic dynamism.

The purpose of a film, however, is to stir emotions, not to convey a reasoned analysis. In emotive power, Burns succeeds. An audience with no prior knowledge of Vietnam will come away convinced this war was a colossal geopolitical error, a waste of lives on all sides and absolutely without redemption. Every fact and picture is accurate, and the cumulative process of selecting some facts and omitting others is devastating.

Burns forsook balance. For instance, my Combined Action Platoon (CAP) consisting of 15 Marines and 30 armed farmers lived for 488 days in a remote village of 5,000 Vietnamese. The two Marines who didn't fit in were dismissed from the CAP. The rest of us slept in the houses of the villagers, ate their food, fought and died side by side with the farmers. Seven of fifteen Marines were killed in the village. In 1966, the village chief, Trao, sent this letter to the parents of our squad leader:

*"To Sgt. J. D. White family...Sgt. White and Sq. work to hard...never look tired...My people are very poor and when to see a marine they are very happy. When V.C. come to people, people come and talk to Sgt. White so Sgt. White can talk to P.F. (local Popular Forces) and marine to fight V.C. Maybe die...Jod bless you all."*²

You won't find that sentiment in the documentary. Yet altogether, there were 118 CAPs and not one fell back to enemy control before the fall of Saigon. In 2002, I returned to the village with Charlie Benoit, who had also fought there. The villagers welcomed us back and asked by name after other Marines who had lived there. Charlie's Vietnamese was impeccable, and between 1967 and 1970, on repeated trips for the Rand Corporation we traveled from one end of South Vietnam to the other. Often we were in villages without any other Americans. Yes, the North Vietnamese were hurling hundreds of thousands of disciplined soldiers into battles that were as savage and pitiless as shown in the documentary. Over that same period, however, there was progress throughout the farming lowlands. The rural population was not in revolt against the government.

American combat troops withdrew from the country in 1972. At that time, North Vietnamese units were still positioned in the jungles of South Vietnam. They had suffered staggering losses months earlier in a major assault that had failed after America had unleashed its B-52s to pound the enemy on the battlefield and in Hanoi. As the documentary points out, 100,000 North Vietnamese soldiers were estimated to have been killed, nearly all the armor provided by the Soviet Union had been destroyed and the North Vietnamese chief of staff warned another offensive could not be mounted for at least three years.³ The North agreed to a ceasefire and a truce that included the return of American prisoners of war. President Nixon promised to respond with force [if the North attacked again](#).

Instead, U.S. Congressional legislation in mid-1973 cut off funds for combat "in or over or from off the shores of North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Laos or Cambodia." The intent was to prevent President Nixon from deploying troops, naval gunfire or aerial bombing if the North Vietnamese persisted in attacking South Vietnam. Over the next two years, Chinese artillery and Soviet tanks poured into Hanoi. While we had promised to provide aid to the South

Continue on next page

VN War Documentary...

Vietnamese, [Congress instead cut our aid](#) of \$2.8 billion in 1973 down to \$1 billion in 1974 and to \$300 million in 1975. When the North Vietnamese attacked in 1975, the South Vietnamese forces ran out of bullets. America had quit, plain and simple.

The Congress and most of the press, however, joined hands in blaming the collapse upon the South Vietnamese. The visceral effect of the Burns documentary is to provide ablution for that abandonment of an ally. The theme of the documentary is that unification under the communists was predestined and therefore the war was unwinnable. Of course, had a similar lack of fortitude guided us in 1953, we would have abandoned South Korea and the communist dictator Kim Jong-un would now be sitting on his throne in Seoul, shaking his nuclear fist at Japan.

Was the collapse of South Vietnam inevitable? Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, currently the White House National Security Adviser, does not think so. He wrote a book entitled *Dereliction of Duty*. Far from being an inevitable tragedy, he concluded that the loss of South Vietnam was “a uniquely human failure, the responsibility for which was shared by President Johnson and his principal military and civilian advisors.”⁴

What could have been done differently? Our basic goal was to force the north to cease attacking the south. Four steps could have been taken. First, beginning in 1965, a blockade by mining the harbors and bombing could have prevented the massive import of Chinese and Soviet military equipment. Without Chinese artillery and Soviet tanks et al, the North could not defeat the South. Instead, the Johnson administration chose not to strategically apply our overwhelming naval and air superiority.

Second, bomb the dikes sustaining the north's rice paddies. Force the able-bodied men to leave the army and undertake subsistence farming. In our Civil War, Lincoln ordered Sherman to devastate the farms of the south and in World War II we systematically bombed German and Japanese cities. War is the act of applying violence—death and destruction—until your enemy agrees to your terms.

Third, grant the enemy no sanctuary. Encourage our commanders to attack on the ground anywhere they had an advantage in North Vietnam, Laos or Cambodia. Attack and withdraw, attack and withdraw. Do not allow the North to mass troops and supplies at places of their choosing.

Fourth, establish joint boards with the South Vietnamese leaders to insure they promote competence and punish corruption. Granted this fringes upon their sovereignty, but our troops should not die for incompetents.

So yes, we could have fought a different kind of war, but the commander-in-chief, President Johnson, chose not to do so. He bullied and berated the generals, who to their discredit acceded a terrible, half-baked campaign of attrition, exchanging American for North Vietnamese lives. That “strategy” was a moral outrage.

When South Vietnam was in dire straits in 1975, I was serving in the Pentagon as the special assistant to Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger. Within the top level of the Ford administration, he received scant support in asking Congress to authorize bombing or military aid. So he personally invited to breakfast every member of Congress and he reached out for support from Democratic leaders like George Meany, president of the AFL/CIO. Schlesinger knew he was jeopardizing his own career. (And he was fired.) He did not succeed in gaining aid, but he did not give up. When South Vietnam did fall, he was the senior leader to whom our military turned for understanding.

Continue on next page

VN War Documentary...

What, then, should be the peroration for the war? Should it be the Burns' documentary, *"The Vietnam War was a tragedy, immeasurable and irredeemable."*

Or should it be what Secretary of Defense Schlesinger wrote to our two million troops, *"Your cause was noble; your dedication was determined. You answered your country's call."*

The Bad War

Vietnam gets the Ken Burns treatment.

Oct 23, 2017 | By [Stephen J. Morris](#)

The Weekly Standard

For their latest collaboration, a 10-part documentary that premiered last month on PBS, filmmakers Ken Burns and Lynn Novick have chosen a subject from living memory. The Vietnam war was a defining event for a generation of Americans. It was also one of the most politically divisive wars in U.S. history. For many years, whenever policymakers contemplated the possibility of overseas interventions, commentators would invoke the so-called "lessons of Vietnam." Yet exactly what those lessons entail has been a matter of continuing dispute. More than 40 years after the war's conclusion there is still no consensus among historians on its origins, the wisdom of the American intervention, and the reasons it ended in failure.

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Among boomer-generation journalists and academics the dominant perspective is that of the antiwar movement. Some hold to the views of the movement's radical or hard-left wing, which considered the war a product of America's iniquitous society and its inherently imperial foreign policy, while the country's Communist opponents were virtuous and popular resisters. Others hold to the views of the antiwar movement's liberal or moderate wing, which saw the war as a product of American policymakers' Cold War misunderstanding of the nature of anticolonialist movements, of which Communist revolutionaries were simply the most radical manifestation. Of course, not all historians accept these strains of thought—military historians, for example, with their focus on the war's military stories and lessons, tend not to—but the antiwar perspective predominates among historians of politics and diplomacy, and among the writers of accounts for popular audiences.

Now along come Burns and Novick, aiming to give the war the kind of myth-busting and myth-making treatment Burns has famously given baseball, jazz, the national parks, and the Civil War. His previous documentaries, some of which he made with Novick, have been broadcast repeatedly on PBS and shown in classrooms across the country. They have lastingly shaped the public understanding of their subjects. *The Vietnam War* is a massive undertaking—it cost some \$30 million and clocks in at 18 hours—and its creators clearly hope it will offer the definitive look at the war.

This is not the first time PBS has attempted to tell the story of the war in a documentary series. Its previous effort was not a ringing success. *Vietnam: A Television History* first aired in 1983. As I wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* at

Continue on next page

The Bad War...

the time, it was “the work of many different and distinguishable hands.” Different producers were in charge of different episodes and the outcomes were tremendously varied. The efforts of Boston-based producer Austin Hoyt on LBJ’s decision to go to war and on the Tet Offensive were models of objective journalism and professional artistry. Relying on interviews with former decision-makers, these episodes focused mostly on how American war policy had been made. Three other episodes produced by Elizabeth Deane were not bad given the state of historical knowledge at the time. But episodes by Boston-based producer Judith Vecchione and two by English producer Martin Smith were imbued with Communist party-line propaganda.

In my *Journal* article, I pointed out major factual errors in Vecchione’s episodes—like the misattribution of the 1930 Yen Bai uprising to followers of Ho Chi Minh—that forced the producers to make changes to the narration for the subsequent release of the series on videotape. Overall, most episodes lacked objectivity to varying degrees and accepted the antiwar movement’s assumption that the Vietnamese Communists were primarily nationalists. Vietnamese Communist functionaries, such as the editor of the army newspaper, Bui Tin, were interviewed for the series. But no South Vietnamese military veterans were interviewed and, significantly, no defectors from the Communist side were interviewed. A [companion book by reporter Stanley Karnow](#) had a more objective journalistic spirit, but its connection to the TV series was tenuous.

Like the old documentary, the new one comes with a companion book, but this time it is directly connected to the television program. Cowritten by Burns and another longtime collaborator, Geoffrey C. Ward, *The Vietnam War: An Intimate History* is an excellent supplement to the documentary: This large volume is lavishly illustrated with color photographs and strongly, though not exhaustively, researched, sometimes providing more factual detail than appears on the screen.

* *

In promoting their new documentary, Burns and Novick have described it as an attempt to spur “[reconciliation](#)” on the war, bridging old divides in American public opinion. National reconciliation may be an admirable social project—but insofar as the documentary is a work of journalism and historical research, it must be judged by its accuracy in matters of fact and on the strength of its interpretations of cause and effect.

Compared to the 1983 PBS program, Burns and Novick’s documentary is more a popular history, since it, in true Burns style, relies heavily on personal accounts of the war by those who actually fought it on both sides as well as Americans who opposed it. The documentarians elected not to interview surviving political decision-makers, which might have introduced *post hoc* explanations, but instead relied mostly on primary documents—written accounts and contemporaneous recordings of presidents and congressional leaders discussing their motives and judgments of the war. The oral histories from ordinary participants, complemented by Peter Coyote’s narration, keep the viewer emotionally and intellectually invested in the story as it unfolds. And the video footage and still photographs used to illustrate the documentary are superb—a testament to the decade of work that went into the project. In particular, the footage selected for some of the battle scenes is so vivid and so well stitched together that the viewer may feel tension of the sort usually evoked by a Hollywood war movie rather than a documentary.

The filmmakers assembled a large number of interviewees with different viewpoints, including veterans of the U.S. armed forces, North Vietnamese citizens and Viet Cong soldiers, and American antiwar protesters. The inclusion of South Vietnamese non-Communists is a welcome innovation, since their voices have generally been excluded from previous documentaries about the war. Many of the oral accounts give long-overdue credit to the bravery and skill of the South Vietnamese soldiers.

Still, although Burns and Novick deserve credit for including different political viewpoints, their efforts in that direction should not be overstated. In an [interview with PBS NewsHour](#), Burns said:

We made sure there was room for everybody in our film. If you still think the—we should be fighting the Commies there still, you know, there’s the representation of that in our film. If you believe that it was wrong from the very be-

Continue on next page

The Bad War..

ginning, there are people that will represent that point of view. But, more importantly, all those shades of gray are able to coexist.

Burns's remark is an exaggeration: Watch the entire series and you will hear no suggestion from anyone that we should still be fighting the "Commies" in Vietnam. Among the 79 interviewees, there were several who thought that the United States should not have abandoned South Vietnam in 1975. To characterize their views the way Burns did is a disparaging misrepresentation, one that reveals a political bias.

Burns and Novick's documentary, like its 1983 predecessor, includes no interviews with Communist defectors. This is a pity, not least because the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong participants and witnesses who do appear on camera were interviewed in Vietnam, and therefore were under the watchful eye of pro-Communist local intermediaries. They were asked to talk about their personal feelings, but were presumably constrained from speaking too freely, lest they contradict the official government line on the politics of the war. Only one, the writer Bao Ninh, seemed to stray close to the edge of what was politically acceptable. ("In war, no one wins or loses," he says in the first episode.)

Yet numerous defectors from communism now live in the United States and France. Most notable is Colonel Bui Tin—a former government spokesman, editor of the army newspaper, and a friend of General Vo Nguyen Giap—who, as mentioned above, represented Hanoi's views in the 1983 television series. Since defecting in 1990 Bui Tin has written a [revealing memoir](#) and [testified before Congress](#). He now lives outside Paris. Why was he not interviewed, along with other ex-revolutionaries who can now speak freely? One suspects that Thomas Vallely had something to do with it. Vallely—a U.S. Marine veteran, a close friend of John Kerry, and like Kerry a former activist in Vietnam Veterans Against the War—was a senior adviser to the series and [helped the filmmakers](#) arrange their interviews in Vietnam. Vallely maintains a strong personal interest in cordial relations with the Vietnamese government and presumably has no desire to rock the boat with Hanoi.

* *

Burns and Novick [have claimed](#) in promotional interviews that their work is not intended to provide answers but to raise questions. That's only half-correct: *The Vietnam War* does raise provocative questions but it cannot avoid offering answers. By the facts and events and interpretations that the filmmakers have included or omitted, they have provided some answers. And those answers discernibly tilt the documentary's analysis of the war toward the views of the antiwar movement.

One place we can detect the tilt is Burns and Novick's choice of American veterans to interview. In a [survey of Vietnam veterans](#) commissioned by the Veterans Administration in 1979, 90 percent of the respondents agreed with the statement "Looking back, I am glad I served my country," and two-thirds said they would serve again if asked. And even though the survey shows that veterans were deeply divided on the question of whether the United States should have ever gotten militarily involved in Vietnam, the proportion of veterans who believed getting involved was the right thing to do was significantly higher than among the general population. But among the documentary's prominent interviewees, such veterans are a minority; most are people who turned against the war. The filmmakers are pointed, and sometimes heavy-handed, in depicting when and why their interviewees became antiwar. And sometimes it's not even the veterans themselves whose turn against the war is highlighted. In one case, since Marine enlistee Mogie Crocker died in 1966, it's his interviewee sister whose antiwar turn is depicted. In another, it's the wife of POW interviewee Hal Kushner who became antiwar and supported George McGovern's peace campaign in 1972. This too was massively unrepresentative of the attitudes of most POWs' wives and families.

Some of the antiwar veterans are shown making absurd moral judgments on camera. For example, Karl Marlantes, a decorated Marine veteran, reads from a letter he wrote to his parents when he enlisted: "I will be taking part in one of the greatest crimes of our century." We can forgive Marlantes for this judgment—he was in his early 20s when he wrote those words—but the filmmakers, in choosing to include it, clearly want us to con-

Continue on next page

The Bad War...

sider the American intervention in Vietnam alongside the 20th century's moral atrocities: the extermination of 6 million Jews and millions of others in the Holocaust, the murder of 10 million or more Russians under Stalin, the killing through famine of over 30 million during China's Great Leap Forward.

An equally absurd judgment comes from series adviser Merrill McPeak, a former fighter-bomber pilot who rose to become a general and by the 1990s was chief of staff of the U.S. Air Force. McPeak tells the filmmakers, "We were fighting on the wrong side"—a comment of such surpassing stupidity that he has since [retracted it](#). It is a shame that more sensible veterans' opinions are not given equal time.

The tilt toward the antiwar movement's views can also be seen in the documentary's overemphasis on the activities of the protesters. The coverage is so disproportionate—they are given time in almost every episode as a kind of counterpoint to the war footage and the veterans' accounts—that the viewer is left with an inflated sense of the protesters' importance. In fact they had a minimal effect on public opinion, and what effect they did have mostly worked against their cause in the eyes of the American people (though they did unnerve Presidents Johnson and Nixon). The antiwar movement's one concrete accomplishment came only after American forces were already withdrawn from Vietnam, when the movement lobbied Congress to cut off aid to South Vietnam, resulting in a massive cutback. But this aspect of the antiwar movement's activities is not even covered in the documentary.

* *

There are other ways, even more explicit, in which the documentary skews toward the views of the moderate or liberal wing of the antiwar movement. In its opening narration, reproduced in the companion book, the documentary offers this summary:

America's involvement in Vietnam began in secrecy. It ended, thirty years later, in failure, witnessed by the entire world. It was begun in good faith by decent people out of fateful misunderstandings, American overconfidence, and cold war miscalculation.

What, in the view of the filmmakers, were those fateful misunderstandings and that Cold War miscalculation?

The five presidents in office during the years of the Vietnam conflict—Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, and Ford—subscribed to the "domino theory," which held that if Vietnam fell to the Communists, all of Southeast Asia would subsequently tumble into communism. The underlying assumption was that the Communist parties around the world, especially in Asia, were interconnected—all parts of a totalitarian ideological movement against the West and its allies. While the domino theory is mentioned in the documentary, the evidence that supported it is not discussed.

Burns and Novick have a different view of Vietnamese Communist motivations. Like the producers of the 1983 PBS series, they are certain that the North Vietnamese were primarily motivated by nationalism. This is particularly striking in the filmmakers' account of the life of Ho Chi Minh. They note that during his three decades in exile from Vietnam, he became a Communist in France—in fact, he was a founder of the French Communist party—and that he "was invited to Moscow to study [and] underwent training as a Soviet agent." However, they do not mention that for nearly two decades Ho was a functionary of the Communist International (Comintern). We are told that he was "dispatched to China to organize a cell of other Vietnamese exiles and help establish the Indochinese Communist party." But even while conceding his many years of Communist organizing, the filmmakers emphasize that Ho "was sometimes criticized for being a nationalist first, a Communist second" and that an unnamed friend of his stated that Ho cared for "only one thought, his country Vietnam."

This "nationalism first" analysis is a major theme of the documentary. If it were correct, then the U.S. decision to intervene against the Vietnamese Communists would indeed have been a tragic blunder. Mere Vietnamese nationalism was no threat to U.S. security, nor to the security of America's allies other than the French colonialists. The whole conflagration could never have been anything other than a futile waste of blood and treasure.

Yet the nationalist interpretation of Ho Chi Minh and his comrades does not stand up to scrutiny.

Continue on next page

The Bad War...

If Ho had thought only of Vietnam he would not have been able to fulfill his Comintern assignment from the late 1920s, which was to assist in the creation of Communist parties in several Southeast Asian countries. In fact, he undertook that assignment assiduously. Moreover, the Vietnamese Communists have always—down to this day—proclaimed their adherence to a Marxist-Leninist view of international affairs, a view that rejects nationalism as an ideology of the feudal and capitalist social classes. However, Lenin, and his Vietnamese disciples, recognized that nationalism could be of some instrumental value in the struggle against “imperialism.” Hence the distinction between “bourgeois nationalism,” which sees nationalism as a primary objective, and “revolutionary nationalism,” which sees nationalism as a temporary expedient in the struggle against “imperialism.”

What’s more, the Vietnamese Communists embraced Stalinism, a particularly violent and totalitarian manifestation of Marxism-Leninism. This is quite bizarre given the fact that Ho Chi Minh was in Moscow again from 1934 to 1938, years of Stalinist terror. He witnessed the arrests and killings of many of his Bolshevik and Comintern comrades, including many fellow Vietnamese Communists—facts that the documentary omits to mention. Some 50 years ago the historian Bernard Fall, in his classic work [The Two Viet-Nams](#), noted of Ho Chi Minh:

That he himself was spared by the ever-suspicious Stalin is significant; perhaps as a practitioner rather than a theoretician of revolution, Ho was not considered dangerous by Stalin—or perhaps he was considered absolutely loyal.

Long after Stalin’s 1953 death, and even after subsequent Soviet leaders and the leaders of Soviet satellite states in Eastern Europe had rejected Stalinist ideology and political practice, Ho and his comrades continued to celebrate the Soviet dictator and his foreign policy. Even a decade after Ho himself died, the Vietnamese Communists marked the centenary of Stalin’s birth with a proclamation praising the dictator for having “waged a struggle against all expressions of opportunism—Trotskyism, rightist opportunism, bourgeois nationalism—in defense of the purity of Marxism-Leninism.”



It is downplayed in the documentary, but Ho Chi Minh was committed to global communism. Here he is shown enjoying a celebratory dinner with fellow Communist leaders Nikita Khrushchev and Mao Zedong in 1959. (Photo credit: Heritage Image Partnership / Alamy)

Continue on next page

The Bad War...

Further insight into the true motivations of Ho Chi Minh and his comrades can be found in [his final testament](#), published by the Vietnamese Communists after his death in 1969. The document includes not a single word of praise for the great nationalist figures of Vietnamese history—not for the Trung sisters, who led an uprising against the Chinese in the first century; or for prince Tran Hung Dao, who defeated the Mongols in the 13th century; or for Le Loi, who led the revolt against the Ming invaders in the 15th century; or even for the emperor Gia Long, who unified the Vietnamese nation in the 19th century. Instead Ho wrote, “I therefore leave these few lines in anticipation of the day when I shall go and join the venerables Karl Marx, Lenin, and our other revolutionary elders.”

* *

The dedicated communism of Ho Chi Minh and his comrades means that nationalism was at most a secondary motivation for them. Once we understand this, we can better grasp what unfolded in 1945 in Hanoi—pivotal events that the documentary interprets misleadingly—and more clearly see the North Vietnamese regime for what it was.

In the last months of World War II, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS)—precursor to the CIA—parachuted operatives into northern Vietnam to establish local intelligence networks that could gather information on the Japanese and help rescue downed American flyers. The OSS made contact with Ho Chi Minh’s small but well-organized Viet Minh forces and decided to arm and train them. Ho’s men not only used these weapons to help the Americans, but also to fight their way into power in Hanoi in August 1945. All this the documentary gets right.

But the documentary omits the fact that the officer leading the OSS team, Archimedes Patti, went beyond his mandate from Washington and began interfering in Vietnamese politics in ways that benefited Ho and the Viet Minh. In particular, OSS officers appeared in public in the company of the Vietnamese Communists. These joint appearances gave ordinary Vietnamese the misimpression that the Viet Minh was the political force endorsed by the victorious Allies.

And Ho’s cooperation with the OSS had another audience in mind as well. Although the Soviet Union would have been a natural ideological ally for Ho and his comrades, it was far away. But under President Franklin Roosevelt, the U.S. government had expressed anticolonial views, which gave Ho hope that the United States, which still had significant forces and resources in the region, might side with him. So he asked his OSS friends for the text of the American Declaration of Independence, and on September 2, 1945, with OSS onlookers nearby, Ho proclaimed Vietnam independent, quoting Jefferson’s language. This was transparently a ploy to secure U.S. support for the new regime Ho was establishing, by making Americans believe that the two countries not only had common interests but shared values.

The documentary admits that Ho’s efforts were “calculated,” but even so does not treat them with sufficient skepticism; a viewer could easily come away from the scene believing that Ho was a Jeffersonian. The fact that Ho had to ask Patti for the language of the Declaration—a fact that undermines the notion that Ho and his adherents had even the slightest familiarity with American political values—goes unmentioned. Meanwhile, the filmmakers show Leslie Gelb, a former Pentagon official and later a *New York Times* journalist, paraphrasing the content of letters Ho sent to President Truman: “We believe in the same things you believe.”

The sincerity of Ho’s statement is belied by the actions soon taken by his right-hand man, Vo Nguyen Giap, in arresting and killing rival nationalists and even the rival Trotskyite leaders who were allied with the Viet Minh. The documentary briefly describes this “merciless purge” in which “hundreds were shot, drowned, buried alive” for the sake of “consolidating Communist control of the revolution.” But it fails to point out how Gen. Giap’s actions highlight Ho’s obvious disingenuousness.

The documentary also has little to say about the actual structure of the Communist state that Ho and his comrades created in the regions they controlled. Nothing about the secret police organization, modeled on the Soviet and Chinese equivalents, that Giap created and originally commanded. Nothing on the Maoist-inspired institutions of party control of all aspects of people’s lives. Contrast this with the documentary’s extensive critical coverage of the much-less-repressive South Vietnamese government. Unlike the North, South Vietnam was never a totalitarian state. In

Continue on next page

The Bad War...

fact, South Vietnam was never even a fully authoritarian state; there was always an organized political opposition, including opposition newspapers.



OSS officers pose with Ho Chi Minh, his right-hand man Vo Nguyen Giap, and their comrades at Vietminh headquarters in 1945.

So why does the documentary offer no detailed account of totalitarian rule in the North? The narrator does mention in the first episode the “brutal land reforms” in North Vietnam. But this murderous event—arguably the greatest single atrocity against unarmed civilians in Vietnamese history—is dealt with in less than 30 seconds. It is diminished in its scope to “thousands of people dead,” when some observers, such as historian Robert F. Turner, [have suggested that](#) 50,000 or perhaps more were killed in the China-guided terror campaign. The documentary offers no explanation for why the Communists carried out this campaign, especially given the fact that shortly thereafter the redistributed land was collectivized under state control. But any explanation would of course have to invoke political motives that would challenge the documentary’s dominant depiction of Ho and his comrades as mere nationalists instead of ideological Communists.

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The Vietnam War provides a reasonable account of much of the war before 1968. There are omissions, however. For example, the political and military situation in Laos and Cambodia, which directly relates to early U.S. military failure in Vietnam, is almost entirely absent from the documentary. And no mention is made of Kennedy’s Laos neutrality agreement of 1962, which called upon the North Vietnamese to withdraw their forces from Laos and stop using the Ho Chi Minh trail yet had no enforcement provisions.

In addition, Burns and Novick do not outline in detail the failed ground military strategy that President Johnson and General William Westmoreland attempted—a war of attrition based upon a combination of search-and-destroy missions seeking out enemy forces in the jungles and bombing North Vietnam with considerable geographical restrictions so as not to incite Chinese or Soviet intervention. The filmmakers fail, too, to discuss the Combined Action Program, in which population centers were defended in partnership with locals, luring the ene-

Continue on next page

The Bad War...

my to fight on American terms—an alternative mode of counterinsurgency operations that the Marines tried with some success.

Adding to the chronicle of despair that the documentary constitutes is the failure to recognize the major successes by the American and South Vietnamese side in the later stages of the war. There were three major successes, which combined should have been decisive in determining the war's outcome.

The first was the Tet Offensive. The Communist leaders had thought that a surprise assault on the cities and towns of South Vietnam by Viet Cong guerrillas, undertaken during the Tet lunar New Year holiday in January 1968, would incite popular uprisings and the overthrow of the South Vietnamese government. But those uprisings never came. Instead, over a month of grueling fighting, the attacking Communist guerrilla forces were routed. Of the estimated 84,000 Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops who took part in the Tet Offensive, we are told that “more than half—as many as 58,000 men and women, most of them Viet Cong—are thought to have been killed or wounded or captured.” We are also told that the Tet Offensive turned U.S. public opinion further against the war, although the reality is more complicated. (Tet provoked a shift in elite opinion, but [as historian David F. Schmitz has put it](#), it “did not cause a dramatic shift in [U.S.] public opinion.”) However, the documentary does not examine the psychological effect of Tet in *South Vietnam*, where it made previously neutral or fence-sitting segments of the population commit themselves more to the South Vietnamese government cause.

Second, the pacification program—the effort to “win hearts and minds” among the population and thereby defeat the Viet Cong—that had begun in 1959 and functioned haphazardly for several years was finally beginning to show signs of success by 1968. The pacification program was actually helped by Tet, since the southern Communist cadres who had surfaced in the campaign were able to be identified and either captured or killed. The expansion of the number of South Vietnamese troops and reconstitution of local village, district, and provincial armed forces brought new stability. And the U.S. focus on intelligence-gathering under the Phoenix program helped to suppress the Viet Cong infrastructure.

By late 1971, the Viet Cong was no longer a threat in the majority of South Vietnamese provinces, especially in the Mekong Delta. I witnessed this development firsthand: As a visitor to South Vietnam in early 1970 and again in early 1972, I could plainly see the difference in the security situation. I traveled through many provinces of South Vietnam in 1972, spending two days with a friend in the South Vietnamese government driving in a car with official license plates, another day in a taxi with Vietnamese locals. If the Viet Cong guerrilla forces had not been suppressed I would probably have been captured or killed. Burns and Novick had access to several expert witnesses to the pacification success—most notably their interviewees Stuart Herrington and Lewis Sorley—but apparently chose not to pursue this issue with them.

Third, Burns and Novick also do not fairly evaluate the Easter Offensive of 1972. In this campaign—the biggest military offensive of the war—the North Vietnamese launched most of their regular forces in a massive three-pronged attack against Quang Tri in the north, the central highlands in the northwest, and An Loc northwest of Saigon. Hanoi's objective was to seize the imperial capital at Hue and cause the collapse of the South Vietnamese army. None of these objectives was achieved, and the small amounts of territory the North Vietnamese were able to seize, notably the city of Quang Tri, were mostly recaptured by the South Vietnamese later in the year.

Burns and Novick are correct to point out that U.S. airpower was vital for South Vietnam's survival. But in focusing on the contributions of American bombers, the filmmakers miss the importance of the South Vietnamese army's willingness to fight for its country. And they fail to recognize that the massive losses the North Vietnamese suffered in the Easter Offensive forced them to substantially modify their negotiating position in Paris, making a peace agreement possible after four years of stalemate.

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Why do Burns and Novick fail to acknowledge the military and political successes from after 1968? A partial explana-

Continue on next page

The Bad War...

tion: They seem to have been strongly influenced by the prejudices of their senior adviser Thomas Vallely, who states glibly in the documentary:

Nixon and Kissinger, they—their job is to clean up. The war's over. Nixon and Kissinger, when they come, they're, they're not going to win the war. So they develop a secret strategy: They surrender without saying they surrender. This is not a bad strategy. This is the only strategy.

Had Vallely been familiar with the transcripts of Nixon's White House tapes, he would have known that surrender was not Nixon and Kissinger's strategy. In a meeting of the National Security Council on February 2, 1972, the president [told the assembled officials](#) of his view of the war in Vietnam:

Because there's one determination I've made: We're not going to lose out there. I determined that long ago. We wouldn't have gone into Cambodia, we wouldn't have gone into Laos, if we had not made that determination. If politics is what was motivating what we were doing, I would have declared, immediately after I took office in January of 1969, that the whole damn thing was the fault of Johnson and Kennedy, it was the "Democrats' War," and we're ending it like Eisenhower ended Korea, and we're getting the hell out, and let it go down the tube. We didn't do that. We didn't do it, because politically, whatever, it would have been wrong for the country, wrong for the world, and so forth and so on, but having come this long way and come to this point, the United States is not going to lose. And that means we will do what is necessary.

Although surrender was not Nixon's strategy, it was the strategy of the antiwar movement, of which Vallely himself was an avid, activist member.

Burns and Novick were also influenced by their adviser Gregory Daddis, a gadfly military historian obsessed with trying to repudiate revisionist histories of the war that demonstrate American and South Vietnamese successes. But for those of us who saw Vietnam firsthand during the war years—Daddis, born in 1967, was too young to do so—the progress made in pacification and Vietnamization during Nixon's first term was clear and undeniable. Sometimes it seems that Burns and Novick go out of their way to depict the South Vietnamese government as negatively as possible. Not only do they focus on its corruption—which was rampant and is a fair subject for exposure—but they also make a point of highlighting the supposed brutality of the regime. The classic episode, one that had a huge effect on the U.S. public, was the street execution of a Viet Cong prisoner by South Vietnamese police chief General Nguyen Ngoc Loan during the 1968 Tet Offensive. This execution was captured as a color moving picture by an NBC cameraman and as a black-and-white still photo by Eddie Adams of the Associated Press. Adams's photo became one of the best-known images from the war. It is a powerful image, and, reprinted as it often is with little explanation or context, it can be powerfully misleading.

Burns and Novick show the gory NBC footage. But they mention none of the circumstances surrounding the execution, other than that the man being shot was "a Viet Cong agent." A viewer unfamiliar with the story is likely to be left with the misimpression of a young man, perhaps roughed up by his enemies, about to be killed for no clear reason. The violence seems grotesque and gratuitous.

The companion book for the PBS series at least offers some of the relevant background:

He was an NLF [Viet Cong] agent named Nguyen Van Lem and may have been the head of an assassination squad. (He had been found with a pistol adjacent to a hastily dug grave that held the bodies of seven South Vietnamese policemen and their families.)

The execution without trial by General Loan may still have been unjustified. But it obviously appears in a different light if one knows those circumstantial facts. ("Still photographs are the most powerful weapon in the world," Eddie Adams would later write about his Pulitzer-winning photo. "People believe them, but photographs do lie, even without manipulation. They are only half-truths.") By showing the execution without the background information, Burns and Novick are eliciting the same emotional response from American viewers today that was generated five

Continue on next page

The Bad War...

decades ago by the unqualified television-video and newspaper-photo presentation of the image: How can we support a government that does things like that?

The Vietnam War rightly does not shy away from exposing the moral failings of the Americans—the atrocities of the Tiger Force commandos; Operation Speedy Express, which may have killed between 5,000 and 7,000 unarmed civilians over six months in 1968-69; the My Lai massacre in 1968. These subjects all ought to be covered in a documentary of this sort.

But where are comparable accounts of Communist atrocities? The Hue massacre—the cold-blooded execution by the Communists of at least 2,800 South Vietnamese civilians (the number may be considerably higher) during the Tet Offensive—is given some attention. But the film allows the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong witnesses to give their version of what happened rather than offering a more objective and thorough account by also interviewing victims' relatives, as producer Austin Hoyt did in a limited way in the 1983 television series.

No attention is paid to the Communist attack on thousands of civilians fleeing from Quang Tri Province during the Easter Offensive in 1972. Nor to the shelling of the civilians mixed in with retreating soldiers in the "convoy of tears" during the South Vietnamese rout of 1975. Nor to the Viet Cong's flamethrower extermination of approximately 300 Montagnard civilians at Dak Son in 1967. Nor to the attack on the refugee village of Duc Duc in 1971, in which 80 civilians died.

The Vietnamese Communists are not treated by the filmmakers as saints, as the radical wing of the antiwar movement always treated them—I am thinking, for example, of the late Tom Hayden and his former wife Jane Fonda, among thousands of others—which is perhaps why the hard-left reviews of the documentary have been so critical. But Burns and Novick are clearly more concerned with highlighting Communists' determination and prowess than their brutality.

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The great history of the Vietnam war is still waiting to be written. The considerable research efforts and brilliant visual presentation of Burns and Novick (and Ward in the companion book) have captured most of the story of the Kennedy and Johnson years. But they have failed to do justice to the years 1968-73, and thus to the war as a whole. Even more importantly, they have failed to grasp the nature of the enemy we were fighting. Ho Chi Minh's calculated plan to market himself and his Communist movement as primarily nationalist was effective both for naïve Vietnamese intellectuals and peasants and for naïve foreigners—even through to today. But Ho and his Communist comrades always considered themselves part of a world revolutionary movement, something much bigger than merely a revolution in Vietnam. They frequently referred to themselves as the outpost of socialism in Southeast Asia. (That is why



The misleading Eddie Adams photograph of Gen. Loan executing a Viet Cong assassin appeared on the front pages of many U.S. newspapers.

Continue on next page

The Bad War...

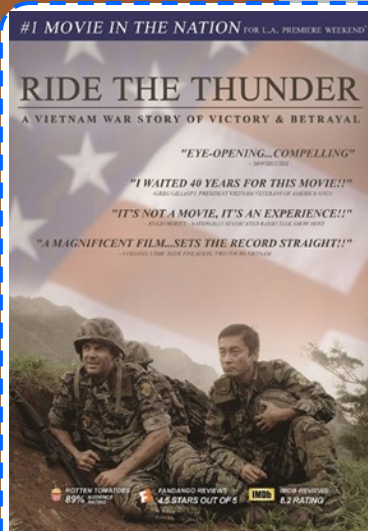
after their victory in 1975, they provided captured American weapons to the Soviet Union for use in Communist insurrections in other nations, most notably in El Salvador in the 1980s.)

The problem is that it is difficult for most people who have never experienced one to grasp the nature of totalitarian movements based on an internationalist revolutionary ideology—and much easier psychologically to reduce it to the familiar, which is nationalism.

Five American presidents and most of their top advisers did not fall into this intellectual trap. But the producers of *The Vietnam War* did. After a century of experience of totalitarian movements and states, and more than 70 years of experience of Vietnamese communism, the time is long past for educated Westerners to be so duped.

Stephen J. Morris is the author of [Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia](#) and working on a book about the Vietnam war during the Nixon years.

Ride the Thunder: based on Richard Botkin's book



"RIDE THE THUNDER" premiered in California with continuous sold out shows and was #1 AT THE BOX OFFICE IN THE NATION (on a per theater basis) receiving outstanding and passionate audience scores from IMDB (8.3 out of 10), Fandango (4.5 stars out of 5) and Rotten Tomatoes (89%)

STORYLINE: "Ride the Thunder", based on the book by Richard Botkin, is the heroic "TRUE" story of the friendship between American military legend and Navy Cross recipient, John Ripley and South Vietnamese war hero, Le Ba Binh. The storyline follows their fight together against the communists during the Vietnam War and then the ensuing aftermath of the fall of Vietnam as Ripley goes home to a divided America and Binh is imprisoned in a communist re-education camp. As Binh struggles to stay alive, Ripley passionately tries to tell America the truth of the war while their wives struggle with their changed lives.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE: The Vietnamese speaking roles in the film were played by Vietnamese refugees from Vietnam. Many of these actors were boat people who had to endure incredible hardships in escaping the communists. (250,000 people died in the ocean trying to escape) Their performances in the film were outstanding, sincere and passionate because this is their story.

WEBSITE: <http://www.ridethethundermovie.com/>

Book Available on Amazon:

Ride the Thunder: A Vietnam War Story of Honor and Triumph—July 13, 2009

<https://www.amazon.com/Ride-Thunder-Vietnam-Story-Triumph/dp/193507105X/>