The Bad War

the weekly Standard

Vietnam gets the Ken Burns treatment.

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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 for the United States.

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 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.

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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.

Lynn Novick and Ken Burns (Photo credit: Dia Dipasupil / Tribeca Film Festival / Getty)

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 beginning, 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.

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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 consider 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.

Vietnam veterans carrying toy guns demonstrate near the U.S. Capitol. (Photo credit: Bettmann / Corbis / Getty)

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.

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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.

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)

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.”

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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."

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

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

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 enemy 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.

In one of the most famous photographs of the war, Marine Gunnery Sgt. Jeremiah Purdie is shown reaching out to a wounded comrade. (Photo credit: Larry Burrows / The Life Picture Collection)

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 explanation: 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.

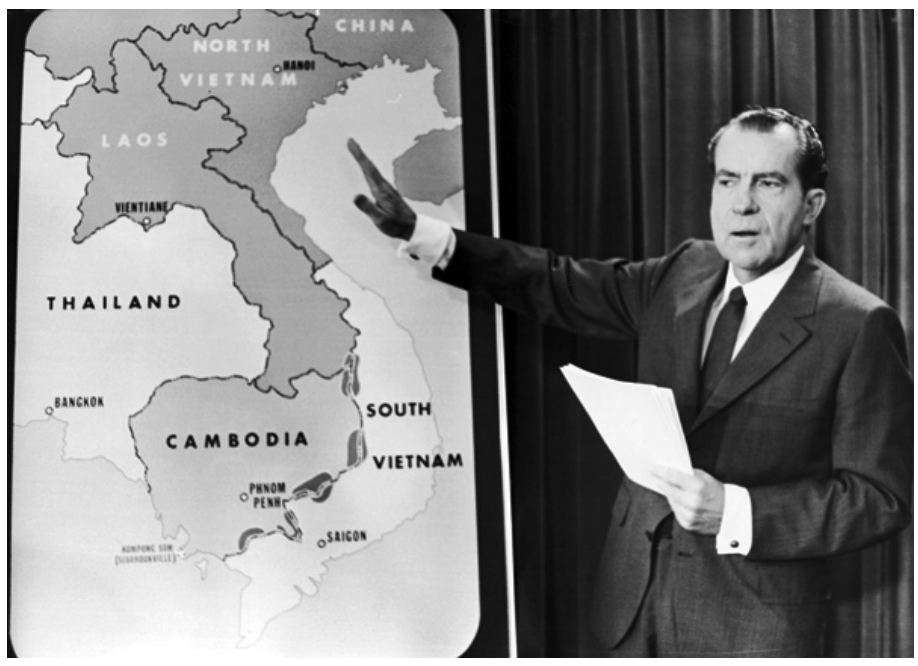

Photo credit: Hulton Archive / Getty

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 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?


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

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 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.*

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