

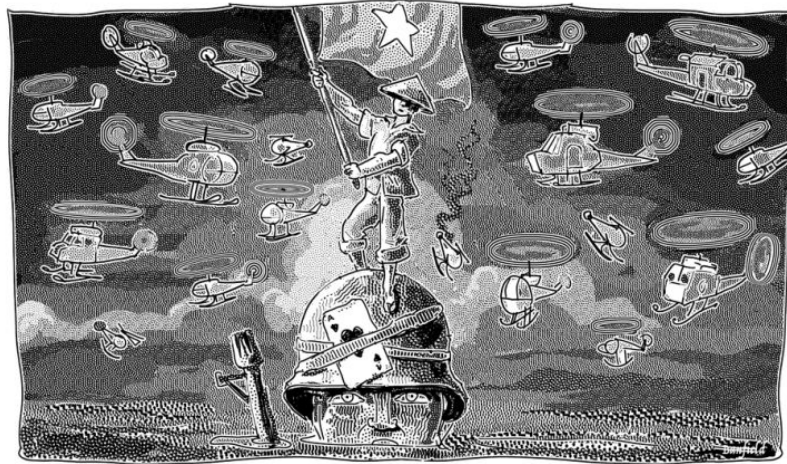
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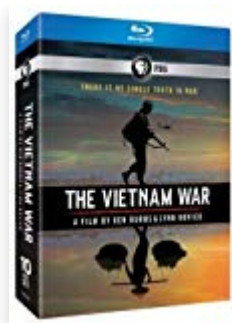
THE VIETNAM WAR REVISITED

Why the conventional history is wrong.

by Mackubin Thomas Owens



REVIEWED



*The Vietnam War: A Film by Ken Burns and
Lynn Novick Blu-ray*

THOUGH NORTH VIETNAM DEFEATED AND ABSORBED SOUTH VIETNAM 43 YEARS AGO, Americans remain divided over their role in that country, as responses to last year's ten-part PBS documentary, *The Vietnam War*, made clear. A veteran proud of my service in Vietnam, I watched the series—purportedly an even-handed examination of the war—and saw one more rendition of the antiwar case, made by those who didn't even acknowledge the existence of counter-arguments.

The series, produced by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, has several problems. First, it isn't really about the war. At the end of the program, the producers tell us, "The Vietnam War was a tragedy," one they call "immeasurable and irredeemable." Still, "meaning can be found in the individual stories."

Second, the documentary downplays the patriotism of those who fought. Contrary to Burns, Novick, and most interpretations, the U.S. military in Vietnam was not an army of unwilling draftees, in which minorities were seriously overrepresented. In fact, two thirds of those who served—and 73% of those who died—were volunteers.

Third, Burns and Novick do not do justice to the war's purposes, which were serious despite the flawed strategy to achieve them. Vietnam's geographic position and cultural strengths made it, as historian David Halberstam wrote years ago, "one of only five or six nations in the world that is truly vital to U.S. interests."

Fourth, *The Vietnam War* persists in describing the conflict as a civil war. But as surely as North Korea invaded South Korea, North Vietnam invaded South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese and their American supporters have consistently dismissed American scholars, such as the late Douglas Pike, who long ago stated this fact. But in 1983, Vo Nguyen Giap and Vo Bam, North Vietnam's chief strategists during the war, admitted that the country's Communist Party decided in 1959 to begin the armed struggle against the Saigon government. The North Vietnamese subsequently built the "Ho Chi Minh" trails to move men and supplies to South Vietnam through Laos and Cambodia, violating those countries' neutrality. These events, long before American combat units came to Vietnam in 1965, confirm the U.S. justification for its action in Vietnam.

But by far the biggest problem with the PBS series is that it ignores much of the revisionist scholarship that casts the Vietnam war in a different light. These interpretations contend that the United States, far from being destined to lose the war, had a number of opportunities to win it.

According to the conventional assessment, embraced by Burns and Novick as if there were no alternative, the United States could never have won, given the nature of the war and the determination of the Vietnamese Communists. The key contentions are drearily familiar: Southeast Asia in general, and South Vietnam in particular, were not vital strategic U.S. interests. The “domino theory” was false—the fall of South Vietnam to the Communists would not lead to the collapse of other non-Communist regimes in Southeast Asia. The South Vietnamese government, utterly corrupt, never commanded the allegiance of South Vietnam’s people, which meant it was always destined to lose a civil war to the indigenous Viet Cong. Finally, Ho Chi Minh was more of a nationalist than a Communist.

In short, the Vietnamese Communists were too resolute, the South Vietnamese government too corrupt, and the Americans too clueless to fight the kind of war that would have secured victory. Vietnam was destined to be a quagmire, and America was destined to lose there. As one American veteran, a lieutenant who fought in Vietnam in 1965, told Burns and Novick, “We have learned a lesson...that we just can’t impose our will on others.”

But, of course, war’s only purpose is to impose one’s will on the enemy. A nation that does not intend to do so, in the expectation of achieving a more secure, more just peace, has no business resorting to war.

Over the past 20 years, however, observers have challenged the conventional assessment. Some have traced our defeat to a flawed national strategy devised by civilian policymakers, especially by Robert McNamara, secretary of defense from 1961 to 1968. Others have indicted U.S. military leadership, both in Washington and Saigon, for adopting a defective operational strategy.

The producers of the PBS series appear oblivious to the revisionist views of writers such as Mark Moyar, whose groundbreaking work on the Vietnam war poses the most important challenge to the assumption that America’s defeat in Vietnam was inevitable. Lewis Sorley appears briefly in the series, but his assessments of Generals William Westmoreland and Creighton Abrams are not deemed worthy of discussion.

The most astute American observer of Vietnamese Communism, Douglas Pike, doesn’t get a mention despite the fact that his analysis of Communist strategy goes a long way in explaining the dynamic of the war. As these scholars show, the United States was not destined to lose in Vietnam. America’s defeat was the result of bad strategy and bad decisions at all levels, from Washington to Saigon.

Lacking the Will

In *Triumph Forsaken*, one of the most important books written on the Vietnam war, Mark Moyar, now a senior advisor at the U.S. Agency for International Development, posed a stark challenge to the conventional view. Published in 2006 by Cambridge University Press, the first of two projected volumes, *Triumph Forsaken* focuses on the period from the defeat of the French by the Viet Minh in 1954 to the eve of Lyndon Johnson's commitment of major U.S. ground forces in 1965. Moyar's thesis is that the United States had ample opportunities to ensure the survival of South Vietnam, but failed to develop the required strategy.

Triumph Forsaken demonstrates that one of the main weaknesses of the orthodox view is its constricted historical horizon. For the most part, the historians whose views shape the PBS series have assessed the war as if the only important decisions were made in Washington and Saigon, neglecting those made in Hanoi, Beijing, and Moscow. Moyar demonstrates the Clausewitzian principle that war is a struggle between two active wills, showing that the North Vietnamese strategy was greatly affected by U.S. actions.

Nothing illustrates the orthodox-revisionist divide more than the respective treatments of South Vietnam's president Ngo Dinh Diem. In the orthodox view, Diem was a tyrant losing control of his country, a Catholic running roughshod over a predominantly Buddhist populace. Moyar contends that, in fact, Diem was an effective leader who put down the organized crime empires that had thrived before his rise to power. He was no democrat, but his legitimacy in the eyes of the Vietnamese people rose from his ability to wield power effectively and provide security for the targets of Communist insurgency. Indeed, under Diem's leadership, the insurgency had been largely stymied by 1960.

Moyar cites Communist documents that acknowledge the North's lack of success in the period leading up to November 1963, when Diem was deposed and assassinated in a military coup. Diem's government had been killing and capturing Communist cadres in unprecedented number, which had caused many survivors to defect. Moyar argues that by far the greatest U.S. mistake was to acquiesce in the coup, a decision that "forfeited the tremendous gains of the preceding nine years and plunged the country into an extended period of instability and weakness."

"I can scarcely believe that the Americans could be so stupid," Ho Chi Minh said of the coup, understanding its import immediately. The Hanoi Politburo recognized the opportunity that the coup afforded the Communists. "Diem was one of the strongest individuals resisting the

people and Communists,” it said. “Everything that could be done in an attempt to crush the revolution was carried out by Diem. Diem was one of the most competent lackeys of the U.S. imperialists.” And indeed, the coup encouraged the Communists to push for a quick victory against the weak South Vietnamese government before the Americans intervened.

As conditions continued to deteriorate, John Kennedy’s successor, Lyndon Johnson, was forced to consider an American escalation of the war in order to save South Vietnam. He did not, as many have argued, use the August 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident as an excuse to escalate U.S. involvement. That claim is belied by the fact that Johnson saw intervention only as a last resort to avoid defeat in South Vietnam and, he thought, the subsequent toppling of the Southeast Asian dominoes. Indeed, most observers at the time criticized Johnson for not responding forcefully enough to the Tonkin Gulf incident. Major U.S. ground intervention did not begin until nearly a year later.

Moyar argues that Johnson rejected several aggressive strategic options formulated by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. These included offensive ground operations by South Vietnamese forces in Laos to interdict the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) lines of supply down the Ho Chi Minh Trail and similar actions north of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). The chiefs also recommended major airstrikes. But Johnson instead accepted the advice of civilian advisers who were enamored of academic “limited war” theories such as the one espoused by Thomas Schelling, who advocated gradual escalation as a means of signaling U.S. intentions. Rejecting these more aggressive options meant that Johnson was left with the choice of abandoning South Vietnam, a step fraught with grave international consequences, or fighting a defensive war within South Vietnam at a serious strategic disadvantage.

Would more aggressive actions have succeeded? We don’t know for sure, but I was personally persuaded in 1983 by Douglas Pike, then director of the Indochina Archive at U.C. Berkeley, based on a paper he delivered at a Wilson Center symposium on the war. He observed that “the initial reaction of Hanoi’s leaders to the strategic bombings and air strikes that began in February 1965—documented later by defectors and other witnesses—was enormous dismay and apprehension. They feared the North was to be visited by intolerable destruction which it simply could not endure.” But as it became increasingly apparent to Hanoi that the air campaign was severely circumscribed, North Vietnamese leaders concluded that the United States lacked the will to do what victory required.

Pike then made an extraordinary claim, comparing the 1965 air campaign to the “Christmas bombing” of 1972. Officially known as Linebacker II, this massive, around-the-clock attack far

exceeded in intensity anything that had gone before. Hanoi was stunned. “While conditions had changed vastly in seven years,” Pike continued, “the dismaying conclusion to suggest itself from the 1972 Christmas bombing was that had this kind of air assault been launched in February 1965, the Vietnam war as we know it might have been over within a matter of months, even weeks.”

General Westmoreland

Another revisionist argument, also ignored by the PBS documentary, holds that even with the mistakes which hamstrung U.S. policy and strategy in Vietnam, the United States came close to victory after 1968. This argument turns on operational strategy—how the war was actually fought in Vietnam. The focus of this debate is General William Westmoreland, commander of U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV).

An early Westmoreland critic was Marine General Victor Krulak, commander of Fleet Marine Force, Pacific. But the most influential historical criticism of Westmoreland’s conduct of the war has come from Lewis Sorley, a career Army officer who served in Vietnam, earned a doctorate in history from Johns Hopkins, and is the author of *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America’s Last Years in Vietnam* (1999) and *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam* (2011).

The PBS documentary ignores the critical debate between the Army and the Marines over how to fight the war. Westmoreland’s operational strategy emphasized the attrition of the PAVN in a “war of big battalions”—multi-battalion, and sometimes even multi-division sweeps through remote jungle areas in an effort to fix and destroy the enemy with superior fire power. The battle of the Ia Drang Valley in November 1965 was an example of his preferred approach.

The battle convinced Westmoreland that his concept was correct. In a head-to-head clash, an outnumbered U.S. force spoiled an enemy operation and sent a major PAVN force reeling back in defeat. But for Krulak, Ia Drang represented an example of fighting the enemy’s war—what North Vietnamese general Vo Nguyen Giap predicted would be “a protracted war of attrition.” As Krulak noted in *First to Fight* (1984), by 1972, “we had managed to reduce the enemy’s manpower pool by perhaps 25 percent at a cost of over 220,000 U.S. and South Vietnamese dead. Of these, 59,000 were Americans.”

For his part, Westmoreland was critical of the Marine Corps approach in Vietnam, which unlike his own, took counterinsurgency seriously and emphasized *small* wars. In his memoir, *A*

Soldier Reports (1976), Westmoreland writes:

During those early months [1965], I was concerned with the tactical methods that General Walt and the Marines employed. They had established beachheads at Chu Lai and Da Nang and were reluctant to go outside them, not through any lack of courage but through a different conception of how to fight an anti-insurgency war. They were assiduously combing the countryside within the beachhead, trying to establish firm control in hamlets and villages, and planning to expand the beachhead up and down the coast.

Westmoreland believed the Marines should, instead, “have been trying to find the enemy’s main forces and bring them to battle, thereby putting them on the run and reducing the threat they posed to the population.”

The Marines employed an approach in Vietnam, the “Combined Action Program,” first used in Haiti, Nicaragua, and Santo Domingo in the 1920s and ’30s. “Marine Corps experience in stabilizing governments and combating guerrilla forces was distilled in lecture form at the Marine Corps Schools...beginning in 1920,” Krulak wrote. The lectures appeared in *Small Wars Manual* in 1940, later adopted as an official publication.

According to Krulak, the Marine Corps approach in Vietnam had three elements: emphasis on pacification of the coastal areas in which 80% of the people lived; degradation of the ability of the North Vietnamese to fight by cutting off supplies before they left Northern ports of entry; and engagement of PAVN and Viet Cong main force units on terms favorable to American forces. Westmoreland, according to Krulak, made the “third point the primary undertaking, even while deemphasizing the need for clearly favorable conditions before engaging the enemy.”

The Army-Marine Corps debate can best be understood by looking at the PAVN strategy, another element the PBS series ignores. According to Douglas Pike’s *PAVN: People’s Army of Vietnam* (1986), the Vietnamese Communists followed a strategy they called *dau tranh* (struggle) consisting of two operational elements: *dau tranh vu trang* (armed struggle) and *dau tranh chinh tri* (political struggle). These operational elements were envisioned as a pincers designed to crush the enemy. Armed struggle had a strategy “for regular forces” and another for “protracted conflict.” Regular-force strategy included both high tech and limited offensive warfare; protracted conflict included both Maoist and neo-revolutionary guerrilla warfare. Political struggle included *dich van* (action among the enemy), *binh van* (action among the military), and *dan van* (action among the people).

As Pike observes, to resist *dau tranh* both arms of the pincer had to be blunted. U.S. and South Vietnamese forces decisively defeated armed *dau tranh*. Pike contends that “the American military’s performance in this respect was particularly impressive. It won every significant battle fought, a record virtually unparalleled in the history of warfare.” But the Allies never dealt successfully with political *dau tranh*, which led ultimately to defeat.

Pike observes that a constant struggle existed between Giap and the *professional* generals, on the one hand, and party leader Truong Chinh and the *political* generals, on the other. From 1959, when the Lao Dong Party in Hanoi decided to launch *dau tranh* in the South, until 1965, the political was dominant. The emphasis on armed struggle became prevalent afterwards, until mid-1968. Four more shifts in emphasis would occur between 1969 and 1975, according to Pike.

The Later Years

During his time as commander in Vietnam, Westmoreland focused U.S. attention on military victory, especially the part of the strategy that relied on regular forces. But he ignored the political struggle and the “protracted conflict” element of armed struggle. Accordingly, he did little to train the Vietnamese army, a policy endorsed by Secretary of Defense McNamara, who claimed that by the time the Vietnamese were trained, the Americans would have won the war.

In *A Better War*, Sorley examines the largely neglected later years of the conflict, concluding that the war in Vietnam “was being won on the ground even as it was being lost at the peace table and in the U.S. Congress.” Sorley argues that Westmoreland’s tactics, which emphasized the attrition of PAVN forces in a “war of the big battalions,” squandered four years of public and congressional support for the war. “Search and destroy” operations, that is, were usually unsuccessful, since the enemy could avoid battle unless it was advantageous for him to accept it. But they were also costly to the American soldiers who conducted them and the Vietnamese civilians who were in the area.

Creighton Abrams succeeded Westmoreland as commander shortly after the 1968 Tet Offensive, joining Ellsworth Bunker, who had assumed the post of U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam the previous spring, and William Colby, a career CIA officer who coordinated the pacification effort. Abrams’s approach was similar to that of Krulak and the Marines, emphasizing not the destruction of enemy forces per se but protection of the South Vietnamese population by controlling key areas. He then concentrated on attacking the enemy’s “logistics nose” (as opposed to a “logistics tail”): since the North Vietnamese lacked

heavy transport within South Vietnam, they had to pre-position supplies forward of their sanctuaries before launching an offensive.

Fighting was still heavy, as exemplified by two major actions in South Vietnam's A Shau Valley during the first half of 1969: the 9th Marine Regiment's Operation Dewey Canyon and the 101st Airborne Division's epic battle for "Hamburger Hill." But now PAVN offensive timetables were being disrupted by preemptive allied attacks, buying more time for "Vietnamization," the shift of military responsibilities from the U.S. to South Vietnam.

In addition, rather than ignoring the insurgency and pushing the South Vietnamese aside as General Westmoreland had done, Abrams followed a policy of "one war," integrating all aspects of the struggle against the Communists. The result, says Sorley, was "a better war" in which the United States and South Vietnamese essentially achieved the military and political conditions necessary for South Vietnam's survival as a viable political entity.

Many commentators, including some authors of official Army histories, argue that the changes from Westmoreland to Abrams were evolutionary, primarily stemming from the failure of the Tet Offensive, which cost the PAVN and Viet Cong so many casualties that they had to change their strategy and tactics. But extensive recordings that Sorley used to write *A Better War* conclusively refute such an interpretation. After Tet, the PAVN tried three times in the next 12 months to achieve major military victories through general offensives, even though it continued to suffer very heavy casualties with nothing to show in return. It was not until after Tet 1969 that Vietnam's Communists abandoned this approach.

Unfortunately, the specter of Robert McNamara has led analysts to over-emphasize the early years of the war at the expense of the fighting after Tet 1968. All too often, the history of the war has been derailed over the question of when McNamara turned against the war and why he didn't make his views known earlier. But as Colby observed in a review of McNamara's disgraceful memoir, *In Retrospect* (1995), by limiting serious consideration of the military situation in Vietnam to the period before mid-1968, historians leave Americans with a record "similar to what we would know if histories of World War II stopped before Stalingrad, Operation Torch in North Africa, and Guadalcanal in the Pacific."

Most studies examining the period after Tet emphasize the diplomatic attempts to extricate the U.S. from the conflict, treating the military effort as nothing more than a holding action. For example, historian Ronald Spector's *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* (1993), compares Vietnam to World War I: each conflict was a "stalemate" but "neither side was prepared to

admit this fact.” Both the Communists and anti-Communists, he observes, made maximum efforts to break the stalemate during 1968.

Sorley disagrees, arguing that to truly understand the Vietnam war, it is imperative to come to grips with the years after 1968. He contends that far from constituting a mere holding action, the approach followed by the new team constituted a positive strategy for ensuring the survival of South Vietnam. Bunker, Abrams, and Colby operated from a different understanding of the war. They employed diminishing resources in manpower, materiel, money, and time as they raced to render the South Vietnamese capable of defending themselves before the last American forces were withdrawn. In the process, they came very close to achieving the goal of a viable nation and a lasting peace.

The dominant assessment’s defenders have replied that Sorley’s argument is refuted by the fact that South Vietnam did fall to the North Vietnamese Communists. They have repeated the claim that the South Vietnamese lacked the leadership, skill, character, and endurance of their adversaries. Sorley has acknowledged the shortcomings of the South Vietnamese and agrees that the U.S. would have had to provide continued air, naval, and intelligence support. But, he contends, the real cause of U.S. defeat was that Congress and Richard Nixon’s administration threw away the successes achieved by American and South Vietnamese arms.

Chances of Survival

The proof lay in the Communists’ 1972 Easter Offensive, the biggest offensive push of the war, greater in magnitude than either the 1968 Tet Offensive or the final assault of 1975. The U.S. provided massive air and naval support and there were inevitable failures on the part of some Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) units. But all told, the South Vietnamese fought well, blunting the Communist thrust, then recapturing much of the territory that had been lost to Hanoi.

Finally, so effective was the 11-day “Christmas bombing” campaign (Linebacker II) later that year that the British counterinsurgency expert, Sir Robert Thompson, commented, “You had won the war. It was over.” But three years later, despite the heroic performance of most ARVN units, South Vietnam collapsed against a cobbled-together PAVN offensive. What happened to cause this reversal?

First, the Nixon Administration, in its rush to extricate the country from Vietnam, forced the South Vietnamese government to accept a cease-fire that permitted PAVN forces to remain in

the south. Then, in an act that shames the United States to this day, Congress cut off military and economic assistance to South Vietnam. Finally, President Nixon resigned over Watergate and his successor, Gerald Ford, constrained by Congress, defaulted on promises to respond with force to North Vietnamese violations of the peace terms.

We cannot say with assurance that South Vietnam would have survived after 1975. But its chances of survival were much improved by Abrams's approach. It is impossible not to speculate about the opportunities and advantages that were lost by not pursuing Abrams's approach, rather than Westmoreland's, from America's entry into the war.

The point is not that the Vietnam revisionists' argument is unassailable. It is, rather, that a major public television documentary series that never even acknowledges the existence of more than one interpretation of the war is either lazy or dishonest, doing a disservice to the program's subject and viewers, as well as to the troops who fought in that conflict.

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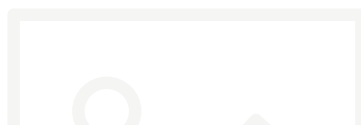
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