“Once was lost but now I’m found, was blind but now I see.” We have had a long love affair with conversion narratives. Ken Burns and Lynn Novick love them too.\(^1\) How else to explain the extraordinary face time devoted to Ron Ferruzzi, John Musgrave (he owned the camera like no one else), and the bathetic Bill Ehrhart, histrionically lamenting a sexual encounter with a Vietnamese girl? All three reprised the enduring antiwar trope of the twentieth century—“innocence lost and betrayed”—and the filmmakers could not turn away. All three had once been true believers. Each came to join the small minority who formed Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW). Such disillusion was informed by the then-pervasive simplicities of the antiwar movement, most prominently that Hồ Chí Minh and his followers were nationalists first, communists second. The filmmakers never decisively break from such assumptions.

We shouldn’t be surprised by Burns and Novick’s interest in such stories. The first books on the war that caught the attention of the country’s major newspapers were invested in the same trope: Lynda Van Devanter’s *Home Before Morning*, Phillip Caputo’s *Rumor of War*, Ron Kovic’s *Born on the Fourth of July*, among others.\(^2\) Caputo saw himself as one of “Kennedy’s knights” longing for his “baptism of fire,” Van Devanter was the “all-American girl” eager to save Vietnam from communism, Kovic was...
a Marine sergeant on his second tour. Each felt betrayed. Even Mount Holyoke College Professor Joseph Ellis, who lied about his service in Vietnam, lied in the same register—innocence lost and betrayed.

This concept was the antiwar legacy of the luminous poets and writers of the First World War, Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, and Wilfred Owen among them. Theirs was a freshness of language and vision that cannot be found in the poetry of the Vietnam War. What was once fresh turns stale, a trope no longer adequate to the vile, morally contaminating, and foreseeable experience of war in the late twentieth century. The innocence and ignorance of young men who had never read Owen or Sassoon is understandable. The filmmakers’ clichéd choices betray a quest for easy moral answers.

The Musgraves and others, however heartfelt their beliefs, were not representative. A 1980 Harris poll revealed that 90 percent of Vietnam veterans were proud to have served, and two-thirds would serve again. These are remarkable numbers especially given the anger and disillusion rampant in the US Army in its final years in Vietnam. Richard Nixon’s “Vietnamization” of the war was a clear message. The cost of the American ground war had been too high. No one wanted to be the last man to die for a mistake.

There are interviews with men proud of their service. James Willbanks and Stuart Herrington, prolific writers on the war, never captured enough of the camera. Vincent Okomoto did. His was a compelling story, a young boy raised in the Japanese internment camps of the Second World War who became a highly decorated platoon leader in Vietnam. He lavished praise on the men who served under him—“How does America produce young men like this?” he asked—while also evincing the brutality of the war. He ordered a bunker cleared with white phosphorus, an incendiary weapon. The victims were unrecognizable.

And then, of course, there was Denton “Mogie” Crocker who enlisted to fight “the international spread of communism.” He kept a grade-school notebook on the Cold War. The filmmakers lavish attention on him, and you know this will not end well. Not only does he die, but his sister comes to join the antiwar movement. And so too, even more painfully, does the wife of Hal Kushner, an army doctor imprisoned for five and one-half years. These were uncommon acts for family members living with tragedy, exceptional in the same way as the actions of the VVAW. Given the
prominence afforded to the two women by the filmmakers, they cannot help but valorize the sentiments of the antiwar movement.

There is another cohort of veterans, far larger than that who joined VVAW. These are men, and perhaps some women, who went to war despite their opposition to the war. Karl Marlantes was one the series captures. A Yale graduate, a commissioned Marine officer, and later a distinguished writer, Marlantes chose to leave Oxford, where he was a Rhodes scholar, to volunteer for Vietnam, where he would serve as a platoon leader. His cosseted year in England led to both feelings of guilt and duty: “I had sworn an oath,” he said. Burns and Novick quote a letter he wrote home at the time: “I will be taking part in one of the greatest crimes of our century.” We may forgive his youthful hyperbole, but it is fair to ask what he had not learned about the Holocaust at Yale.

Marlantes was not alone. Some fifteen thousand men during the years of the war served as conscientious-objector medics. Many came from churches that embraced just-war doctrines, not pacifism—Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Episcopalians, and others. Every objector had to profess opposition to all wars, but it was the immediate specter of the war in Vietnam that provoked such decisions.

One such objector was David Rogers, who would go on to a distinguished career as a political journalist for *The Boston Globe* and *The Wall Street Journal*. A Roman Catholic from New Jersey, Rogers elected to serve as a conscientious objector. “I felt someone else down the street would go in my place,” he told me. This was at a time when thousands of young men went to great efforts to game the draft, as three of our recent presidents did. Rogers served as a combat medic with the First Infantry Division and was wounded. Others paid an even higher price for their altruism. Thomas W. Bennett, a conscientious-objector medic in Bravo Company, 1/14, Fourth Infantry Division, received the Medal of Honor posthumously for his repeated efforts to tend to wounded soldiers in Pleiku Province on February 11, 1969. There is a building named for him at West Virginia University.

Such stories convey a moral valence more complex and troubling than the clichéd stories of innocence lost and betrayed. Full disclosure—I too served as a conscientious-objector medic. While Burns and Novick want to
honor the service of veterans, they cannot free themselves from the trope that the true heroes of the war were the men who once believed in it and turned against it. And there is nothing more powerful than an emotional and confessional television narrative.

One of the lasting legacies of the war is the long reach of the antiwar movement’s romanticizing of the Việt Cộng, and especially of Hồ Chí Minh. Recently, the otherwise thoughtful critic Louis Menand could write in The New Yorker that Hồ Chí Minh “was a communist because he was a nationalist,” a statement of historical ignorance made worse by its pithy certitude. Burns and Novick acknowledge Hồ Chí Minh’s communism, but cannot resist bald recitals of Hồ Chí Minh’s imploring and ignored letter to Woodrow Wilson, his support of the United States against Japan, and, of course, his invocation of the American Declaration of Independence as he asserted Vietnam’s independence in 1945. Leslie Gelb, with a copy of the Wilson letter in his hand, suggests Hồ Chí Minh’s meaning without a trace of skepticism or irony: “We believe the same things you believe.”

Never mentioned as context was the communists’ popular-front policy before and during the Second World War or their 1941 embrace of the primacy of national liberation in temporary alliance with noncommunist nationalists. When the alliance ended in a “merciless purge,” the villain, however, was not Hồ Chí Minh but Võ Nguyên Giáp. Hồ Chí Minh was out of the country, the filmmakers tell us.

The mythology surrounding Hồ Chí Minh and the Việt Cộng has weighed on veterans as well. I’ve known veterans who came to believe they were fighting on the wrong side, none so publicly and spectacularly as Gen. Merrill McPeak. There he is, the former chief of staff of the US Air Force, staring obliquely into the camera and saying: “We were fighting on the wrong side.” Imagine an empathic documentary filmmaker, not wholly invested in the voyeurism of the genre, asking, “Do you really want to say that, sir?” It turned out, McPeak did not. He could not back away fast enough.

In depicting Hồ Chí Minh as a simple, avuncular patriot, which is the mythos he cultivated, rather than as a man who lived most of his adult life in the embrace of the Comintern, Burns and Novick make their biases clear. The prominence given to the “innocence lost and betrayed” veterans
underscores their biases, similar to those of the liberals who opposed the war and continue to cling to romanticized images of Hồ Chí Minh and the Việt Cộng.

In interviews, Burns made clear he wanted to make room for many voices, that he sought to raise questions rather than offer answers, and that he hoped his and Novick’s work would lead to reconciliation. The Vietnam War documentary does succeed in adding more Vietnamese voices, but their appearances are brief, lacking context. Viewers never learn why they were chosen, nor how representative they were.

So how do you conclude an emotionally wrought film series when you claim you have no answers, only questions? How do you make the case for “reconciliation”? You cue up the bathos of the Beatles’ “Let It Be.” And then you claim, as Burns did in a Washington Post podcast, that a final scene of “little kids playing in a helicopter” is a form of “ultimate reconciliation,” and that “the machine of war has become a safe and benign toy.”

The audience deserves better. Forty years on, when the debate over the war for most Americans has not advanced since the 1960s, we deserved answers, not just questions. We still await a balanced portrait of a bloody civil war made bloodier yet by American intervention, while honestly portraying both the strengths and weaknesses of the contending Vietnamese forces.


Notes


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**MULTIMEDIA REVIEW**

ALEX-THAI DINH VO

**Forum: The Vietnam War: A Film by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick**

Deep in the mind and conscience of many Vietnamese, we did not want war. Sometimes, though, people just do not have a choice. If I had been born on the other side of the parallel, I might have been a communist. And so would you, your siblings. But being born on this side, I am, now, labeled a loser. However, losing is not synonymous with not having ideals or legitimacy.

—Vô Đình Tán

*The Vietnam War: A Film by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick* reflects a pervasive America-centrism and fear. America-centrism is the practice of viewing the world solely from the US perspective. The fear I am referring to is the aversion to being challenged by the complexity of war and history, which could threaten that cherished centrism. Perhaps the documentary series reflects the views and fears of the documentarians. Or maybe it represents their assumptions about what Americans view and fear.
Whatever the case, it is alarming to know that these biases continue to preclude a fuller understanding of the Vietnam War, even though it ended nearly half a century ago and even though many studies have painted a much more intricate picture of the war.

America-centrism puts blinders on our ability to see value in anything that is not the US perspective. Fear often leads to the desire for reassurance and security. Chronic fear often bespeaks a need for more consolation and even more reassurance. With *The Vietnam War*, Burns and Novick soothe rather than challenge. Hence, despite ten years of production and $30 million, behind the veneer of archival footage and photographs and captivating cinematography, the series, at its core, is nothing more than a regurgitation of outdated one-sided tropes that advances a dishonest and dangerous argumentative and narrative framework.

Burns and Novick have served up a platter of comfort food. This is not to say *The Vietnam War* is junk food. It is not. It has moments that will and should please military personnel, policy makers, civilians, and even historians. Thus, it is okay to indulge, once in a while. However, we should not mistake that fleeting comfort for nutrition. The war in Vietnam and in Indochina was much more complicated than *The Vietnam War* would have its viewers believe. It is necessary to demand more of Burns and Novick, of the American people, of Vietnamese from all sides and affiliations, and, of course, of ourselves as students of history.

This review addresses four elements of the documentary series: (1) Ken Burns and Lynn Novick’s objectives for its creation, along with an examination of its sources, framework, and representation biases; (2) themes that have been repeated in the series; (3) the selective omission of information, facts, events, and issues; and (4) the dangerous consequences of this misinformed documentary. It concludes with a call to explore new avenues for understanding the Vietnam War.

**Objectives, Guiding Sources, Framework, and Representation Biases**

On the PBS website and at promotional events, Ken Burns and Lynn Novick claim that the purpose of the ten-part, eighteen-hour documentary series was to tell “the epic story of one of the most consequential, divisive,
and controversial events in American history as it has never before been
told on film.” Burns claims to be a neutral storyteller. “We weren’t trying to
make arguments. We didn’t have a political agenda. We wanted to be
umpires calling balls and strikes, but to do that, to see those pitches coming
in, we needed to hear about the war from lots of different folks.” And like
Burns’ other war documentaries The Civil War and The War, the object
seems to be to unpack a complex conflict so the sides in the war can search
for healing and reconciliation.

Burns and Novick attempt to do this by trying to “explore the human
dimensions of the war through revelatory testimony of witnesses from
all sides—Americans who fought in the war and others who opposed it,
as well as combatants and civilians from North and South Vietnam.”
They claim to have considered more than one thousand people and
interviewed about a hundred. Of these, only seventy-nine appear in the
final version.

However, in contrast to their ambition to present a complex and fair
representation of the war and those who lived through it, the witnesses who
share their accounts are not necessarily representative. Most of the people
who were interviewed were mid-level military men and intelligence per-
sonnel, with a few civilians, journalists, diplomats, and protesters. These
people, especially soldiers, are arguably the most important in war, but
war’s effects and consequences cannot be limited to their experiences and
accounts. Despite that, the series begs the question of whether its inter-
viewees should represent other sectors of society, those whose life experi-
ences during wartime are no less valuable to their community and their
country. Hence, like most war documentaries that came before, The Viet-
nam War avoids any attempt to understand the war from other vantage
points and areas of experience, especially those that could challenge its
argumentative and narrative framework.

Moreover, of the 79 witnesses who appear, there are nearly twice as
many Americans (50) as Vietnamese (29). There are 68 men (43 Amer-
ican and 25 Vietnamese) and 11 women (7 Americans and 4 Vietnamese).
These numbers, especially the number of Americans, are perhaps to be
expected, presumably because Burns and Novick are catering to an Amer-
ican audience. By tailoring the series to attract a larger audience at the
expense of representation, Burns and Novick choose to listen to just a certain type of voice, to reconfirm a certain belief, and to accept a simplistic version of the Vietnam War. Through that, they acknowledge that America and its people, despite their diversity, are not as open as they proclaim. Or maybe Burns and Novick do not expect much of us as a nation and people.

The problem of representation is exacerbated by Burns and Novick’s disproportionate choice of individual Vietnamese to represent everyone associated with North and South Vietnam. Of the twenty-nine Vietnamese who appear on screen, thirteen belonged to the North Vietnamese Army, six to the National Liberation Front, and nine to the South Vietnamese government, while one was a journalist born in North Vietnam during the war who did not participate directly in it. Thus, twenty Vietnamese interviewees were associated with the communist-led Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam but only nine with South Vietnam. This is surprising given that the war was fought mainly in southern Vietnam. By dint of this disparity, the screen time favors the communist-associated Vietnamese, while minimizing voices of South Vietnamese, as has been done through most American historical narratives of the war.

There is also an overreliance on the narratives and perspectives of Phan Quang Tự and Dương Văn Mai. The latter, appearing in seven of the episodes, and eight to ten times in some of them, seems to drown out the voices associated with the Republic of Vietnam. This is not to suggest that Dương Văn Mai’s voice shouldn’t be heard, but anyone who is familiar with her knows that her views do not represent those of many southern Vietnamese. One can argue that her presence was needed to keep the attention of American viewers, because she is charismatic and well-spoken, but so are many other Vietnamese women of her generation currently living in America.

This is baffling given that among the estimated 2.1 million Vietnamese currently residing in the United States, Burns and Novick chose nine. Logistics aside, given the way in which the Vietnamese government censors discussions of the war, Burns and Novick give the impression that it was easier to interview Vietnamese in Vietnam than in the United States. The implication is that the accounts of people who risk retaliation, like People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) officer Hồ Hữu Lạn, who described the
massacre at Huế, are more trustworthy than those of Vietnamese in America. This selective discrepancy raises the question of the absence of South Vietnam and South Vietnamese in Burns and Novick’s constructed American consciousness, even though the flag of the former Republic of Vietnam now flies in many America cities, and even though many Vietnamese have become US citizens.6

Besides oral accounts, the series makes exceptional use of a large collection of digitally remastered archival footage and photographs from around the world, along with secret audio recordings from inside the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations. Burns and Novick also use over one hundred iconic recordings from the greatest musicians of the Vietnam War era.7 The musical selections did make the series more engrossing. Music was important to protesters and soldiers, city dwellers and villagers, politicians and citizens. As Burns states, “The moralist in us wants to say black or white, good or bad, young or old, red state or blue state, whatever it is....And we tried to create a place [music] where many different and differing perspectives can coexist.”8 However, Burns and Novick limit this common place to the American experience. None of the musical selections were in Vietnamese from either side of the DMZ, written by composers like Văn Cao, Phạm Duy, or Trịnh Công Sơn or performed by singers like Quang Hùng, Thanh Huyễn, Thanh Thúy, Khánh Ly, or Duy Khánh. There was not even an English cover by a Vietnamese singer like Elvis Phương or Tuán Ngọc. This omission typifies their America-centric view of the war.

However, these shortcomings pale in comparison to the documentary’s narrative framework. For no discernible reason, Burns and Novick resist giving historians or academic researchers on the war any screen time. These perspectives, of course, are not necessary, but one would think that including them would help. While the filmmakers did rely heavily on a twenty-four-member advisory panel of journalists, writers, activists, veterans, military experts, and historians, the emphasis seems to be on military experience. Among the journalists were the famed Neil Sheehan, Joseph Galloway, and John Laurence; writers included Tim O’Brien and Karl Marlantes. Absent are Keith Taylor, Christopher Goscha, Peter Zinoman, Pierre Asselin, Lien-Hang Nguyen, Tuong Vu, and Van Nguyen-Marshall,
known for their expertise on Vietnam, French colonialism in Indochina, North Vietnam’s social and political conditions, Vietnamese communism, or South Vietnamese society.

This advisory panel had three Vietnamese members: Nguyên Ngọc, Huy Đức, and Dương Văn Mai Elliot. Nguyên Ngọc is a respected PAVN officer, writer, and former Vietnamese Communist Party member, and Huy Đức is a famous journalist, blogger, and author of Bên thắng cuộc [The Winning Side], a comprehensive two-volume history on life in Vietnam after the end of the Vietnam War.9 Dương Văn Mai Elliot is the author of the memoir The Sacred Willow.10 She was born in Hà Nội, raised in Sài Gòn, and was educated and has spent most of her life in America.11

The disparity between the number of American and Vietnamese advisors alone should be a matter of critical discussion. Moreover, most viewers would not be familiar with these advisors and their views of the war, and therefore will miss the documentary’s narrative leaning. However, anyone with a knowledge of the work done by the advisors can see that the panel’s perspective is skewed.

Episode 1 lays the foundation for the advisory panel’s influence on the documentary’s argumentative and narrative framework. Titled “Déjà Vu,” it begins with France’s colonial occupation of French Indochina in 1858, through World War I, the Japanese invasion of mainland Asia in World War II, the Pacific War and the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan, social and political upheaval in China, the rise of the Soviet Union, the Korean War, the nuclear age, and the end of colonialism, including French Indochina. The narration is repeatedly interrupted by snippets of the war in the late 1960s, creating a hypnotic, harrowing, and confusing sensation. The historical context provides some explanations for how and why the United States become entangled in Vietnam. But the visual and narrative interruptions keep reminding viewers of the episode’s title.

French colonialism made a mess of Indochina and of Vietnam, and eventually the French were defeated there and forced to leave. America, the episode seems to suggest, would not fare any better. The flashbacks link the two periods as though the embers of war that marked the fall of the French empire were threatening to consume America’s war in Vietnam. The mess that the French created and then left in Vietnam was a result of
colonial arrogance; the American presence would be no different. Hence, the narrator states that the war:

was begun in good faith by decent people out of fateful misunderstandings, American overconfidence, and Cold War miscalculation. And it was prolonged because it seemed easier to muddle through than admit that it had been caused by tragic decisions, made by five American presidents, belonging to both political parties.

Burns and Novick thus argue that the war was unnecessary, unjust, and unwinnable, that the American presence was also a result of arrogance and therefore America would suffer the same fate as France.12

Revisiting Common Themes

With the premise that America’s failure in Vietnam was inevitable, Burns and Novick use a carefully crafted script and poignant but selective witness accounts to present many questionable facts and narratives. Inevitability, here, was born from illegitimacy; America had no legitimate reason to be in Vietnam or to fight against/resist a legitimate government led by Hồ Chí Minh in support of a “puppet illegitimate” regime in South Vietnam, and therefore its presence in the North-South conflict was doomed to fail. To establish this argument, the series becomes a mission to establish legitimacy for the opposition, the communist-led Democratic Republic of Vietnam, while delegitimizing America, its policies, and especially its ally, the Republic of (South) Vietnam. The apparent goal is to create a picture of a corrupt and illegitimate South Vietnam from leaders to soldiers, and therefore not worth American efforts, resources, and lives. Hence, America’s involvement was a mistake made by US presidents and ranking officials in respective cabinets and the military, thus forcing young American men into a terrible situation. From this construct, it was wrong and unjust for America to support South Vietnam instead of North Vietnam. Hence, the sacrifices that America made in Vietnam were pointless.

To establish North Vietnam’s legitimacy, the first and most important task for Burns and Novick is to establish Hồ Chí Minh’s nationalist credentials, something that others have already done. Either by accident or design, they ignore all other nationalists, nationalist groups, or movements
that preceded or that were operating at the same time. These include Phan Bội Châu, Phan Châu Trinh, and Nguyễn Thái Hộc, as well as prominent nationalist parties like the Vietnamese Nationalist Party and the Đài Việt Party, which prior to the rise of the communist party in Vietnam and Hồ Chí Minh were the inspirations for modern Vietnamese nationalism. Eliminating them makes it possible for the filmmakers to cast Hồ Chí Minh as the one and only nationalist, savior of the nation. They go further by repeating the notion that Hồ Chí Minh adored American democratic values so much that he even quoted Thomas Jefferson on life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in his proclamation of Vietnamese independence from France. What is lacking here, however, is a critical perspective from Burns and Novick to show that not all Vietnamese believe in this narrative, that research has proved otherwise, and that Hồ Chí Minh’s rule does not align with what he and his party often proclaimed.

In contrast, nationalists that rose up under the Republic of Vietnam are reduced in the series to products of American imperialism. Hồ Chí Minh’s counterpart in South Vietnam, Ngô Đình Diệm, is delegitimized, along with South Vietnam and everything associated with it. The narrator depicts Ngô Đình Diệm as aloof, autocratic, mistrustful, shrewd, deceptive, and cruel. This depiction is not necessarily untrue, yet was just as applicable to Hồ Chí Minh and his regime.

Conspicuously absent between Hồ Chí Minh and Ngô Đình Diệm is Bảo Đại, the Nguyễn Dynasty’s last emperor. Nothing is mentioned of him and his role in the 1940s and 1950s and the establishment of the State of Vietnam. Also omitted is the description of Japan handing power over to Bảo Đại and his declaration of Vietnamese independence on March 11, 1945, five months before Hồ Chí Minh took advantage of the turbulent social and political condition following the defeat of Japanese forces in the Pacific to make his own declaration of independence in September.

By omitting Bảo Đại to concentrate on Hồ Chí Minh and Ngô Đình Diệm, the documentary rehashes many old and false narratives of the war. In the documentary, Vietnamese communists are portrayed as self-reliant, determined, and committed to defeating foreign aggression to unify the country. South Vietnamese are described as corrupt and unruly puppets and dependents of the United States. North Vietnamese soldiers and Việt
Công guerilla fighters were scrappy and courageous men willing to sacrifice for the greater good. South Vietnamese soldiers were inept, treacherous. Americans soldiers, however, are depicted sharing the best qualities of the enemy. They were men of good faith who were courageous and heroic, despite their leaders’ errors in sending them to South Vietnam.

On an individual basis, there may be truth to some of these characterizations, but it is doubtful that it was this simple. With this type of characterization, however, Burns and Novick can achieve two essential tasks. The first is to use individual stories, narrated by American veterans, to demonstrate the qualities that made US soldiers and their experience in Vietnam both heroic and human; serving in Vietnam was a patriotic answer to their nation’s call to duty. A similar sentiment is used for the Việt Cộng and North Vietnamese troops but at the expense of the South Vietnamese and their government. This made it possible to achieve the second task, presenting the argument that America was supporting the wrong side. In achieving these tasks, Burns and Novick place the brunt of the blame for the war on US presidents and military commanders on the ground.

Misrepresenting leaders and soldiers by selectively highlighting positive qualities of some groups but not others is just one of many ways that Burns and Novick achieve their objective. In touting Hồ Chí Minh’s good qualities as the supreme leader of North Vietnam and especially his adoration for democratic values, they ignore the oppressive society that Hồ Chí Minh and his compatriots created and led. A closer look at the land reform, the campaigns to rectify the party and the military, the Nhân Văn Giải Pháp affairs, and many other events might have revealed North Vietnam as a far more repressive government than South Vietnam. In fact, Vietnam is still a repressive country. In contrast, an examination of southern Vietnamese society during the Vietnam War, whether under the Ngô Đình Diệm or Nguyễn Văn Thiệu governments, might reveal a much freer society for some people, as Huy Đức acknowledges in the series’ concluding episode. Moreover, to have a better understanding, Burns and Novick could have investigated the many problems within the American military as well, such as the racism with which American advisors and soldiers treated the Vietnamese.

To be fair, not everything in The Vietnam War is outdated; Burns and Novick did include some bits of new information. Americans will
appreciate learning that Lê Duẩn, the unbending militant general secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party who eclipsed Hồ Chí Minh in controlling North Vietnam, was responsible for escalating the war in southern Vietnam. Vietnamese viewers, especially in Vietnam, will appreciate hearing John F. Kennedy’s, Lyndon Johnson’s, and Richard Nixon’s secret recordings to get a sense of their frustration, confusion, and uncertainty about the situation and strategies in Vietnam. This is not new, but viewers in Vietnam can probably get a good understanding of the influence of the press and the antiwar movement on how the United States developed and implemented its policies in Vietnam. All viewers are likely to be touched by the heartrending stories of veterans and their families. The stories describe the effects war has on a person and that soldiers were not the senseless, cold-blooded killers that they are often assumed to be. Lastly, the images of death and destruction, especially of Vietnamese civilians, are testimony to the mass suffering that the war caused.

Selective Omissions

Although this is probably the best and most up-to-date documentary on the Vietnam War, its strengths are outweighed by its America-centric nature and bias and the decision to cherry-pick, misrepresent, and omit many important facts, events, and issues in order to maintain its argumentative and narrative framework. For example, when comparing the massacre at Huế by PAVN / Việt Cộng soldiers to the Mỹ Lai massacre by American soldiers, one would assume that Burns and Novick would afford at least as much time, if not more, to the former. Huế cost at least two thousand eight hundred lives, while Mỹ Lai took about five hundred lives. One is rarely talked about; the other has been discussed and written about many times, as both should be. The filmmakers, however, spent only three minutes on Huế and nearly ten on Mỹ Lai. Burns and Novick surely had the time and resources to go more deeply into what happened at Huế by interviewing at least one surviving family member or extracting more from Nguyễn Ngọc and Hồ Hữu Lạn, both of whom acknowledged that the massacre was committed by PAVN / Việt Cộng, but they chose not to.14

By avoiding this topic, they prevent Americans and Vietnamese, especially Vietnamese in Vietnam, from arriving at a clearer understanding of
the foe that the Americans and South Vietnamese fought. The Vietnam War was not lost for any one reason, not due to errors committed by American leaders and commanders and not due to corruption and ineptitude by the Sài Gòn government alone. The causes and effects of many factors count, including an enemy that was willing to be ruthless not just toward its enemy but also against its own people. To ignore this is to ignore the communists’ willingness to win at all costs, including sacrificing over one million troops. This does not concern Burns and Novick, for it could disrupt their argumentative and narrative framework.

Similarly, Burns and Novick overlook military victories by South Vietnamese and Americans, while focusing on tactical victories by the North Vietnamese. This emphasis seems to demonstrate American strategic errors and highlight South Vietnamese incompetence, as though those battles were typical. Whenever there was a major victory by South Vietnam, such as the Easter Offensive, the narrator quickly credits American airpower for it. The series skims over the number of casualties on each side without evaluating why North Vietnam was willing to sacrifice at least a million troops to achieve victory. It highlights North Vietnamese and Việt Cộng soldiers’ dedication and commitment to the national cause but ignores the hundreds of thousands who defected to South Vietnam. It hammers home the narrative that the government of South Vietnam was corrupt and illegitimate, without explaining why more than two hundred fifty thousand South Vietnamese troops sacrificed their lives to it.

These are several of the many issues that Burns and Novick either mention only in passing or omit. This is what is so tragic and dangerous about the documentary; the filmmakers were so consumed by their own fear and America-centrism. The result is a simplistic and cherry-picked portrayal of the Vietnam War. That approach prevented them from being impartial and providing context and counterexamples to demonstrate the complexity of the war. In *The Vietnam War*, Vietnam is just a backdrop to the dissection of America’s past and present, with the aim of healing any wounds and divisions that were caused by the war. In this America-centric approach, Vietnam and its people are only objects of argument. If they cared more about Vietnam and its people, the filmmakers’ choices for representation would not have been so slanted, the research that went into
producing the documentary would not have been so artificial, and the narrative would not have been so simplistic.

Dangerous Consequences of a Misinformed Story

The purpose of any documentary, *The Vietnam War* included, is to convey a message, an argument, or simply information to a large audience. The production of *The Vietnam War*, and its release forty-two years after the fall of Sài Gòn, took place during a time when people expect documentaries to do more than tell a story. Thus, making the documentary reframes the Vietnam War to be about lessons to address contemporary social and political issues, such as America’s military involvements around the world and the rising disenchantment that the US military has caused among the American people. *The Vietnam War* is in this sense a way to help America address and understand its problems. Tangential to this is the healing of old wounds and repairing broken relations. Hence, the documentary was broadcast widely to American viewers on PBS, while a Vietnamese-subtitled version was streamed online for viewers in Vietnam.

History can teach lessons, but it becomes problematic, if not dangerous, when it is recreated to serve a contemporary purpose. When that happens, history is no longer history, but whatever the present wants history to be. As a consequence, *The Vietnam War* is misleading. However, this is not obvious to every viewer, and so by the end of the last episode, many viewers will come away believing that what they have seen is accurate and objective. This is especially true of many Vietnamese viewers, who, unlike Americans, lack access to different critical and competing schools of interpretation. Judging from reactions of Vietnamese viewers on social media, especially young viewers who know little about the war, the documentary is consistent with the Vietnamese state’s perspective. Huy Đức, one of the advisors and on-screen commentators, summed it up best by stating that the series “attributed almost every sin to Washington, appraised highly the strategy of the North, and at times showed disdain for leaders of the Republic of Vietnam.”

Hence, most Vietnamese and Americans will see Americans as foreign aggressors, communist Vietnamese as revolutionary saviors, and South Vietnamese as illegitimate puppets of American imperialism. Mỹ Lai will
make a greater impression on the viewers than Huế. They will hear the confusion and frustration from US presidents when they had to make a difficult decision or lie to the American people, but not the voices of Lê Duẩn, Lê Đức Thọ, or Võ Nguyên Giáp on how to lie to their own people about the number of casualties that consistently tripled or quadrupled that of their enemies. All these combined may explain why the Vietnamese government didn’t denounce the series as it has others. Nor has Hà Nội tried to prohibit Vietnamese viewers from watching the movie. Why resist a supposedly unbiased documentary when it is more effective than any propaganda movie? Within the first two months of its premiere, The Vietnam War was viewed by more than thirty-nine million Americans, including Vietnamese Americans, and might have been viewed by several million Vietnamese. With each passing year, it will reach and influence more. And this is what I fear most about The Vietnam War.

This fear derives from my personal experience growing up in postwar Vietnam and being mocked as a “puppet child”—a child of Võ Đình Tấn, an official serving the former Republic of Vietnam. It derives from having a classmate in seventh grade tell me, “you and your family deserved to lose,” after we had just finished watching an episode of Vietnam: A Television History. It derives from getting an F- on a midterm paper at the University of California, Berkeley, and one full page of comments from the professor claiming that I “could not get over the bitterness that my family was on the losing side of the war,” and arguing that the failing grade was not because I had dared challenge his selective biases. This fear derives from seeing the same message hidden in The Vietnam War under the pretext of healing and reconciliation.

I can understand the need for healing and reconciliation for Americans and for Vietnamese, but not if others are demonized in the process. Healing is not just remembering one’s experience in war, in a moment of near death, in postwar traumas and challenges; it is also about acknowledging each other’s pasts, recognizing each other’s existences, and accepting each other’s purposes. In many ways, the United States and the government of Vietnam, as associates, have come to a reconciliation. Most Americans, however, do not know that the same cannot be said of the relationship between the Vietnamese government and the former
associates of South Vietnam, and that is tragic. Part of the reason is that to this day, terms such as “puppet regime,” “traitors,” and “reactionaries” are still used in public speeches, in history texts, and in the press and television to demean the RVN and those associated with it. The Vietnam War, a film made for healing and reconciliation, continues to rob southern Vietnamese of their agency, legitimacy, and ideals. However, an unjust war from an America-centric perspective does not mean that it was also unjust from the perspectives of the communist Vietnamese or the South Vietnamese.

New Avenues for Understanding the Vietnam War

My critical evaluation of The Vietnam War, focusing more on its failings, derives from what I have learned and experienced personally, and more importantly, from my demand for better and more critical treatment of the history of the Vietnam War. We cannot accept a documentary that is devoid of critical awareness and perspectives just so that thirty or forty million people can see it. The history of the Vietnam War does not and should not be monopolized by the faces of a few men like Hồ Chí Minh, Ngô Đình Diệm, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, or Richard Nixon, nor should it just be about political strategies and military victories and defeats.

Understanding the meaning of the Vietnam War demands that we get rid of our biases and the fear of challenging ourselves to go beyond the discourse that has centered on military conflicts and diplomatic dealings. Instead, we should explore the societies, people, and socioeconomic dynamics that shaped people’s lives and decisions during and after the war. We should also explore the cultural climate and products that were created in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the Republic of Vietnam. Perhaps in this way, we will realize that agency, legitimacy, and ideals do not simply rest on public pronouncements, on what happened on the battlefields, or on the outcome of a war.

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Notes
6. Moreover, any claim to tell the story of the Vietnam War in a way that has never been done before should not be limited to Vietnamese and American witnesses. The production team should have made more of an effort to find Laotians, Cambodians, Chinese, Russians, Koreans, and Australians to add some perspective.
10. Dương Văn Mai Elliot, *The Sacred Willow: Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Note that the film identifies her as Dương Văn Mai Elliot in her role as advisor and as Dương Văn Mai whenever she is on screen, perhaps so viewers will take her account as a Vietnamese person more seriously.
11. Note that her husband, the political scientist David Elliot, is also a member of the advisory panel.

12. This is an old argument currently advanced most prominently by Fredrik Logevall in two seminal works, *Choosing War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) and *Embers of War* (New York: Random House, 2014). Burns and Novick seem to use Logevall’s argument as their central narrative framework. The remaining episodes operate within this framework using sources written by other advisors, like Neil Sheehan’s *A Bright Shining Lie* (New York: Vintage, 1989), Gregory A. Daddis’ *Westmoreland’s War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), *Withdrawal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), and Duong Van Mai Elliot’s *Sacred Willow*. Thus, witnesses’ accounts in the documentary are like small pieces of puzzles selectively inserted into the larger narrative to serve the same purpose, while creating the illusion that the personal anecdotes and vignettes of those who lived through the war represent the meaning of the Vietnam War and what it is to be in war. Along the way, it is possible to see contrarian efforts by scholars such as Edward Miller in his book *Misalliance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), James Willbanks’s *Abandoning Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), *The Battle of An Loc* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), *The Tet Offensive* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), *A Raid Too Far* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2014); and Huy Đức’s *Bên Thắng Cuộc*. Informative contents can be found in scholarly works such as Lien-Hang T. Nguyen’s *Hanoi’s War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012) or Pierre Asselin’s *Hanoi’s Road to the Vietnam War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015). Nonetheless, these efforts were not enough to erase Burns and Novick’s obvious bias.

13. Also missing are other nationalist factions, including the constitutionalists, republicans, royalists, and Trotskyists.

14. A classic depiction of the story at Huế is Nhã Ca’s *Giải Khän Sò Cho Huế* (Westminster, CA: Việt Báo, 2008), recently translated by the historian Olga Dror, titled *Mourning Headband for Hue: An Account of the Battle for Hue, Vietnam, 1968* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016). The translation is accompanied by an extensively researched introduction. On not extracting more from Nguyễn Ngọc or Hồ Hữu Lạn, it is possible that they did talk more about the massacre but Novick and Burns chose not to use that content. It would be good to know not just which witness accounts Burns and Novick don’t have, but also what they do have but did not use.

15. Lt. Col. James Willbanks did present a counterdepiction when asserting, “The bottom line was that all the airpower in the world would not make a difference if the ARVN hadn’t stood and fought. They had held Kon Tum, they had held
An Loc, they had retaken Quảng Trị. They had taken the best that the North Vietnamese had to throw at them.”


17. Ibid.


19. As recent as April 2019, Vietnam Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc called diasporic Vietnamese “exiled reactionaries” [bọn phân dòng lưu vong].