

The Fallacies of Burns and Novick's Documentary on the Vietnam War

I find myself disappointed and perplexed that my organization, Vietnam Veterans of America, that has a legacy of support of Vietnam Veterans, their families and issues, has not made any comment on the Burns and Novick documentary on the Vietnam War and those of us who were part of it, re-write of history. The documentary was a cinematic master piece but content wise it lacked total truth in content. They used some truths in the production but, they put an inaccurate spin on those truths. Unfortunately this big dollar, well-advertised, done by big time history scholars, slanted epic will be used as the defining history of the Vietnam War for years to come. It was said by Ken Burns, "that more than one truth can coexist," not everyone has their own perceptions and opinions of what truth is, but the truth is just that, the truth. The truth can be manipulated but then it is not the truth, it is a narrative with some aspects of the truths. I have always found some people are educated beyond their intelligence and have their version of what they proclaim as truth.

As the symbol of Vietnam Veterans all across the world, Vietnam Veterans of America needs to make sure our legacy is as accurate as possible with the war being the most misunderstood, myth driven war in the history of the United States. We as Vietnam Veterans should do all we can to make sure the real story of the American Vietnam War is told for our children, and our children's children. As veterans, depending on the year, unit, location, rank and job we did in country our stories are different. Most of us only knew where we were (if we did) for that day and our mission was to survive along with our buddies for that day. Not many of us were privy to the overall strategy.

Go on line. There is so much misinformation on line it is frightening. If a student was to try to research the war, they could easily completely miss the real story. Once a story is put out on the internet it is there, right or wrong, opinion or fact, it is available for the world to see and make a decision on erroneous "facts." So what is wrong with the documentary? To use a quote from Ken Burns himself, "I grew up in the 60's, I was eligible for the draft. My father was against the war, so I was against the war." Does this imply a draft dodging war protestor is telling our story?

Mark Moyer says in a piece he wrote about why American and South Vietnamese Veterans were not enthused by the documentary, "The foremost reason is that Burns and Novick are not impartial referees, but instead use the documentary to promote an agenda, in ways glaringly obvious to Veterans though not readily apparent to those too young to have lived through the war. Burns and Novick wish to show that America fought in a war that was unnecessary and unwinnable and that it did so out of national hubris. It's as if a football team won 150 games, tied 10 and lost 2 over seven seasons, but its video chronicler focused only on the ties and losses." Author and historian John Del Vecchio, in his on line rebuttal of the documentary states, "The wars outcome was not the inevitable result of superior North Vietnamese dedication or American arrogance, as Burns and Novick would have us to believe, but of errant U.S. strategic choices and in the last case, the antiwar sentiments of American members of Congress. Veterans also object to the production's favorable depiction of antiwar activist. Burn and Novick lead the audience to believe that the men who stayed home and protested against the war were as well-intentioned as those who served in Vietnam and were actually supporting the better cause." Del Vecchio goes on to quote Tatiana Sanchez's article in the Mercury News, "A lot of us have a tremendous sense of pride for what we attempted to do and defend," said Veteran Jim Barker. On the PBS series panel discussion at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Vietnam veteran and historian Lewis Sorley said that Burns was, "profoundly wrong for referring disparagingly to what he call Americans puffed-up sense of exceptionalism." Sorley added, "Clearly Burns does not much like America"

Del Vecchio makes the statement that, "the filmmaker's bias is most evident in what is omitted. The documentary stresses the Communist' success in marshaling Vietnamese civilians to move supplies and equipment during the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 but makes no mention of the massive logistical support provided by the Chinese, including 1,000 trucks and tens of thousands of troops. This omission fools viewers into believing that the Vietnamese Communist were self-reliant, in contrast with the anti-Communist, who are depicted as puppets and dependents of the United States." Greg Daddis, who served as a historical advisor warned that, "This documentary should not become the accepted gospel of Vietnam." Sutton Vo, a former major in South Vietnam's army engineering corps, watched the series but has told friends and family not to do so. The film is "pure propaganda," he said. Another South Vietnamese officer Cang Dong said of the series, "Everything is a big lie. To our people, Ho Chi Minh was a big liar and immoral." A comment for an American Vietnam Veteran, "The full presentation is like a big dish of fried rice with lots of nice ingredients that are tasty, however, among the ingredients are little bits of stone that crack your teeth and will not digest. These are parts inserted among all the truthful history that are inaccurate, misleading and even false. But most people watching the show will not realize it and swallow it all."

In another piece by John Del Vecchio he says, "there was a thematic chorus repeated by Burns and Novick in various ways: The Geneva Accords...The Agreements... The Elections were not lived up to by Diem and the Americans. This myth has been a mainstay of the narrative established by the left-leaning elements going back at least to the early 1960's and is a lie. The Agreements were essentially two documents; and yes they were written. Free elections, to be supervised by the UN, are mentioned. The division between North and South at the 17th parallel is laid out. Much like the Korean Peninsula, two nations were recognized. However the first document was signed by a French General and a representative of the Viet Minh. The second, the final document was not signed by anyone! The U.S. was not a party to it; nor was Diem or his government; nor was the Viet Cong; nor was Ho Chi Minh. Not to mention this pertinent fact is a major lie by omission. Not being signed means it was not agreed to. There was no agreement! This being the case, North Vietnam's assault upon the South by sending thousands of troops and political cadre, plus tons of war materials, into the South to run a terror campaign designed to overthrow the government of the South and to gain rule over the land, can only be seen as an attack upon a sovereign nation by another nation."

Bing West, a CAP Marine in the Vietnam War wrote, the purpose of the film is to stir emotions, not to convey a reasoned analysis. In emotive power, Burns succeeds. An audience with no prior knowledge of Vietnam will come away convinced this war was a colossal geopolitical error, a waste of lives on all sides and absolutely without redemption. Every fact and picture is accurate and the cumulative process of selecting some facts and omitting others is devastating. Burns forsook balance." In a survey of U.S. 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 the general population. But among the documentary's prominent interviewees, such veterans are a minority; most are people who turned against the war. It is a shame that more sensible veterans' opinions are not given equal time. In the California Political Review, Roger Canfield says of the Documentary, "Burns selected veterans whose war stories bring one to tears, anger and even hate. An ugly American is repeatedly depicted waging an illegal, immoral, unjust, racist and unwinnable war. To Burns, America is the real enemy in Vietnam. A blizzard of facts and a cacophony of sounds obscure key points and advance falsehoods."

To me, the photo taken by Eddie Adams was just as emotionally powerful when shown during the Documentary as when it was first shown on American TV in 1968. The photo of South Vietnamese Police Chief General Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing Viet Cong agent Nguyen Van Lem without some type of explanation is misleading and unfair. Whether the shooting was justified at the time may be questionable, to not explain the time and circumstances is almost criminal. The incident was in the middle of the TET attack in Saigon, Lem known by General Lom and was thought to be the leader of a communist death squad was captured with a pistol adjacent to a mass grave containing the bodies of seven South Vietnamese Policemen along with their families. Lem was not in any type of uniform, was a spy and assassin captured in the heat of battle. Eddie Adams apologized to Lom for taking the picture as it was used to show a picture of a corrupt and cruel South Vietnamese government. At the same time the documentary rightfully so does not shy away from exposing the moral failings of American troops but is very light on the Communist atrocities and even allow the communist to give their versions of those atrocities without any word from the victim's families.

There are many, many more examples of why this documentary should not be the defining history for future generations to read and study. But to sum it up best the following quote from John Del Vecchio gives things to consider and discuss. "Does anyone recall the Jim Roan anecdote about achieving the good life, where he compares it to baking a cake? One, he said, should put in all the best ingredients: the best eggs, the best milk, the best flour; and if possible they should be included in perfect proportions. The oven is preheated just so, so cooking can be precise. But then at the very last moment before popping the pan into the oven, some people add to the batter a teaspoon of sand. The results turn out to be something completely inedible. This is what Burns and Novick have done with their series. There are many good elements included, many accurate stories told, but it is as if into every episode he has added a teaspoon of sand."

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