

Burns/Novick/PBS “Vietnam War” Episode 1: What They Got Wrong

By Prof. Robert F. Turner

I have spent much of my professional life studying, teaching, and writing about the Vietnam War. It started with a 450-page undergraduate honors thesis on the war in 1966-1967, followed by two tours as an Army lieutenant and captain on detail to the American Embassy in Saigon, a brief stint in country as a journalist, and three years as the in-residence Vietnam War expert at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace (where I wrote the first major English-language history of Vietnamese Communism¹ and a monograph using the *Pentagon Papers* to refute some of the more popular myths of the war²). In more recently decades, I have taught undergraduate and interdisciplinary graduate seminars about the war at the University of Virginia and elsewhere.

When I learned that Ken Burns was turning his remarkable talents to producing an 18-hour documentary on the Vietnam War, I was troubled. Few conflicts in history have been more misunderstood than Vietnam, and I knew anything done by the beloved Ken Burns would influence the public perception of that controversial conflict for decades to come.

When I received an email expressing concern that the documentary might be filled with errors, I forwarded it to some fellow Vietnam veterans with a note that we needed to watch it carefully to spot and try to correct any errors. A few weeks later, Burns’ co-director, Lynn Novick, emailed me—saying a number of people had forwarded my message to them—and we later had multiple very cordial telephone conversations. Her basic request was as simple as it was reasonable: Please don’t comment until you have seen the entire series. I agreed.

I have now watched the series—portions of it more than once. As I expected, it is beautifully done—complete with original music by the legendary Yo-Yo Ma. But, sadly, it does little to help the viewer understand the Vietnam War.

Episode One is entitled “Déjà Vu (1858-1961),” and sets the stage for the remaining nine parts of the series. At least in passing it makes a number of important points—such as acknowledging the brutality of the Viet Minh and the decisive role played by Communist Chinese military assistance to Ho Chi Minh’s forces—but it totally ignores perhaps the most important single fact in the debate. The United States went to war in Vietnam to assist a victim of unlawful armed international aggression (just as we had done in Korea less than fifteen years earlier). This fact is today as unknown to most Americans as it is beyond serious doubt—as Hanoi has publicly repeatedly and confirmed it since the war ended.

In February 1965, the Department of State published an elaborate “white paper” entitled *Aggression from the North* that included photographs of captured Soviet and Chinese weapons taken from the Viet Cong. But, throughout the war, professors and protesters said that was a “lie” and there was no “aggression” from North Vietnam. I lost count of the times in the film that the conflict was described as a “civil war.”

A fallback argument during the war was that, since Vietnam was only divided temporarily at the 1954 Geneva Conference, it was perfectly lawful for North Vietnam to try to reunite the country by armed force. But that argument fails when we recall that Korea was also temporarily divided after World War II, and when North Korea sought to reunify that country by armed force in June 1950 the UN Security Council denounced the aggression and authorized the United States to lead a military force under the UN flag to defend South Korea.

The Burns-Novick documentary paid a great deal of attention to the fact that, in the period following World War II, Ho Chi Minh and his Viet Minh coalition were strongly supported by American soldiers of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS)—the predecessor of the CIA. And that’s certainly true. It is also true that Ho described his military as the “Viet-American Army” and praised the United States as a “champion of democracy.” Ho even began his August 2, 1945, Declaration of Independence with these words: “All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among them are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” But what is missed is that this could have been the behavior of a pro-U.S. Jeffersonian Democrat, or of a dedicated Leninist trying to deceive the Americans in his rise to power. Both history and Ho’s subsequent behavior confirm the later interpretation. Put simply, Ho coned the OSS.

Ho Chi Minh departed Vietnam in 1911 at the age of 21 and did not set foot in the country again for thirty years. As a member of the French Socialist Party in December 1920, Ho spoke out in favor of abandoning the Second (Socialist) In-

¹ Robert F. Turner, *Vietnamese Communism: Its Origins and Development* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1975), <https://www.amazon.com/Vietnamese-Communism-Development-Institutions-Publications/dp/0817964312>.

² Robert F. Turner, *Myths of the Vietnam War: The Pentagon Papers Reconsidered* (N.Y.: American Friends of Vietnam, 1972) available at <https://cnsl.virginia.edu/sites/cnsl.virginia.edu/files/Turner-Myths.pdf>.

ternational and joining the Third (Communist) International—also known as the “Comintern.” Ho then traveled to Moscow, where he was trained as a Comintern operative and for decades he traveled the world on a Soviet passport doing Moscow’s bidding. Reflecting on this background, the once top-secret *Pentagon Papers*—so highly praised by leaders of the antiwar movement when they were leaked to the press in 1971—described Ho as “an old Stalinist trained in Russia” who presumably “spoke with authority within the upper echelons of the communist party of the Soviet Union.”³ Indeed, official North Vietnamese accounts assert that when Ho was present in Macao on February 3, 1930, for the formation of the Indochinese Communist Party, he was there as the “official representative” of the Comintern.⁴ Another official North Vietnamese account assert that when Ho finally returned to Vietnam in 1941 and presided over the Eighth Conference of the Indochinese Communist Party, he did so “on behalf of the Communist International.”⁵

The Burns-Novick documentary notes that when Ho returned to Vietnam during World War II he named the mountain where he made his hideout “Karl Marx,” and a nearby stream “Lenin.” They apparently did not consider that a genuine Vietnamese nationalist would have chosen names like Nguyen Hue, Le Loi, or Pham Boi Chau. Of course, Ho would hardly have honored the prominent twentieth century anti-French nationalist Chau, since Ho had betrayed Chau to the French to get money for his movement and eliminate a rival to Communist leadership of the anti-French resistance.

The film focuses heavily on Ho’s record as a leader of the anti-French resistance following the end of World War II. And that was certainly the primary reason for his popularity with many Vietnamese. But the documentary fails to mention that President Roosevelt was determined to prevent the re-colonization of Indochina by the French—who, he said, had exploited Vietnam for nearly 100 years, asserting “the people are worse off than they were at the beginning.”⁶ At Yalta and Potsdam in 1945, it was decided by the allies that Nationalist China would replace the defeated Japanese in Vietnam north of the 16th parallel and Great Britain in the south.

Had Ho simply been a nationalist seeking independence for his country, one might have expected him to cooperate with other nationalist groups at that time in seeking to establish a free and independent Vietnam. But, as a dedicated Leninist, Ho viewed the true nationalists as bitter rivals (“reactionaries”) and, above all else, wanted to ensure Communist control of the revolution and the Vietnam he hoped it would produce. So Ho Chi Minh signed an agreement in Paris on March 6, 1946, actually inviting the French to return to Vietnam so that the nationalist Chinese—who were anti-Communists and had close ties to nationalist groups in Vietnam—would have to leave. The *Pentagon Papers* note that Ho then denounced Vietnamese nationalist groups who had refused to “welcome” the returning French, and shortly after the Chinese nationalists withdrew in June “the Viet Minh, supported by French troops, attacked the [nationalist Vietnamese] as ‘enemies of the peace,’ effectively suppressed organized opposition, and asserted Viet Minh control throughout North Vietnam.”⁷ (The Viet Minh was created and controlled by the Communists, but most members were unaware of that.)

Some assert that Ho assumed the French would voluntarily surrender control of Vietnam to the Viet Minh government pursuant to the March 6 agreement, a view that profoundly underestimates Ho’s political sophistication. In reality, Indochinese Communist Party First Secretary Le Duan explained Ho’s true motives in an important 1970 essay, describing the 1946 move as a creative application of the “shrewd recommendation of Lenin” to fight only one enemy at a time: “We would at one time reach a temporary compromise . . . with the French in order to . . . wipe out the reactionaries . . . thus gaining time to consolidate our forces and prepare for a nationwide resistance to French colonialist aggression, which the party knew was inevitable.”⁸

Yet another common myth is that the United States supported the return of French colonialism to Vietnam after World War II. As already noted, President Roosevelt strongly opposed the return of the French. The *Pentagon Papers* document that, when the French returned to Vietnam after the war, the State Department issues a statement that “it is not the policy of this government to assist the French to reestablish their control over Indochina by force.”⁹ Soon thereafter, the same source reports: “[T]he US steadfastly refused to assist the French military effort, e.g., forbidding American flag vessels to carry troops or war material to Vietnam.”¹⁰ After Mao’s victory in China in October 1949, as it became increasingly obvious Ho’s organization was committed to Communism, the United States did fund most of the French military effort in Vietnam. But the *Pentagon Papers* note: “[T]he rationale for the decision to aid the French was to avert Indochina’s sliding into the Communist camp, rather than aid for France as a colonial power or a NATO ally.”¹¹

³ *Pentagon Papers* (Sen. Gravel ed.), vol. I, p. 261.

⁴ See, e.g., Ho Chi Minh, *Selected Works*, vol. II, p. 145 (1961).

⁵ *President Ho Chi Minh—a Brief Biography* (Hanoi, 1970).

⁶ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. I, p. 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁸ Le Duan, *The Vietnamese Revolution, Fundamental Problems, Essential Tasks* pp. 39-40 (Hanoi 1970).

⁹ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. I, p. 17.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

In reality, there was tremendous evidence of North Vietnamese aggression in South Vietnam dating back to the late 1950s. Just three months before a group of “resistance fighters” in South Vietnam allegedly announced the formation of the National Liberation Front for South Vietnam in December 1960, the Vietnam Worker’s [Communist] Party in Hanoi passed a resolution that read in part: “To ensure the complete success for the revolutionary struggle in south Vietnam, our people there, under the leadership of the Marxist-Leninist Party of the working class, must strive to . . . bring into being a broad National United Front.”¹² (We know this because Hanoi published a multi-volume set of the Third Party Congress proceedings and conveniently translated it into English.)

There was considerable other evidence as well of Hanoi’s controlling role in the conflict; but none of it is necessary now that Hanoi has published its official history of the war—translated into English under the title *Victory in Vietnam* and readily available on Amazon and elsewhere—which documents in detail its May 19, 1959, Politburo decision to open the Ho Chi Minh Trail and start sending troops, weapons, and supplies through Laos and Cambodia into South Vietnam to overthrow its government by force. That was more than five years before the American Congress, by a combined margin of 99.6%, enacted a statute authorizing the American President to use military force to defend South Vietnam (as well as Laos and Cambodia) if they requested our help from Communist aggression.

One of the many flaws with the Burns-Novick series is that the former U.S. military “witnesses” tended to be overwhelmingly from the antiwar camp. More than one-third of the American war veterans featured in the series were associated with Vietnam Veterans Against the War, which was composed of a small fraction of one percent of Vietnam veterans. We actually know what Vietnam veterans thought about the war, because President Jimmy Carter instructed the Veterans’ Administration to commission a public opinion poll to ascertain the views of those veterans. Conducted by the respected Harris Poll organization and published by the Senate Committee on Veterans’ Affairs in July 1980, the poll established that more than 90 percent of Vietnam veterans were glad they had served their country, and two-thirds said they would willingly go back again.¹³ The people who interpreted the poll data reported: “[T]he vast majority of these veterans are patriots.”¹⁴ Again, I don’t know why the veterans interviewed by Burns and Novick did not reflect this reality, but they clearly did not—and the disproportionate representation of antiwar vets in the video thus mislead viewers.

Among other important myths that appeared repeatedly in the video is that Ho Chi Minh was a popular “nationalist” dearly loved by the Vietnamese people, and he would clearly have won a “promised” reunification election in July 1956 had it been held as provided by the 1954 Geneva Agreements. Therefore, the United States and its puppet regime headed by South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem refused to allow those elections. Once again, the *Pentagon Papers* refute this contention. In reality, at the 1954 Geneva Conference neither South Vietnam (then known as the “State of Vietnam”) nor the United States agreed to anything involving future elections. That was because North Vietnam was given a larger population, and the Communist delegations refused to agree to any form of effective international supervision of elections. The wisdom of the decision not to agree to unsupervised elections was affirmed during subsequent “elections” in the North—where voting was conducted in public view with Communist officials “assisting the people” in marking their ballots. Ho Chi Minh never received less than 99.98% of the votes. The *Pentagon Papers* document that, at the 1954 Geneva Conference, both the delegations from the State of Vietnam and the United States insisted that any reunification elections be “supervised specifically by an international commission ‘under United Nations auspices.’”¹⁵

When the French sought to lure the Viet Minh in to a major battle at Dien Bien Phu, General Vo Nguyen Giap pulled off a remarkable logistical feat by building a road through heavy jungle and transporting Chinese artillery into the surrounding mountains disassembled and mounted on bicycles and pack animals. Paris pleaded with Washington to rescue French forces with American air power, but President Eisenhower had two conditions: America would not go without at least Great Britain, and there must be “a French guarantee of complete independence to the Associated States [South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia], ‘including unqualified option to withdraw from French Union at any time’”¹⁶ The British refused to join in a rescue effort, so the United States did not intervene.

Yet another problem with the Burns-Novick documentary is the treatment of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem, who was portrayed as an American puppet and tyrant. Diem was a complex man, and a serious discussion of his character and contributions is beyond the scope of this short piece. Diem was murdered more than a year before I began my scholarship on this topic, but we had several mutual friends who over the years provided me with important insights. My University of Virginia faculty colleague Frederick “Fritz” Nolting served as U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam from

¹² Democratic Republic of Vietnam, *Third National Congress of the Vietnam Workers’ Party* (Hanoi, 1960) vol. I, p. 62-63.

¹³ United States Senate, Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, “Myths and Realities: A Study of Attitudes Toward Vietnam Era Veterans,” Submitted by U.S. Veterans’ Administration, 98th Cong, 2nd Sess., 1980, p. 25

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Pentagon Papers*, vol. I, p. 120.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* vol. I, p. 124

1961-1963 and was deeply impressed with Diem. Michigan State University Professor Wesley Fishel praised Diem's competence, courage, and integrity, as did Dr. Tran Van Do—who had headed the State of Vietnam delegation at the 1954 Geneva Conference but later had strong political differences with Diem.

But by far the most important source in forming my own assessment of Diem was Bui Cong Tuong, in my view perhaps the most important Viet Cong defector in the war in political terms. Tuong had served as chief of education, culture, propaganda, and training for the Viet Cong's Ben Tre Province (called Kien Hoa Province by the South Vietnamese). During a drive back to Saigon one evening in 1971 I asked him what he thought of Diem. He responded that when they heard on the radio that Diem had been assassinated in 1963 they thought it "must be some kind of trick," for surely the Americans would not be so foolish as to allow anything to happen to Ngo Dinh Diem. Tuong explained that he and other senior Party officials viewed Diem as a great Vietnamese patriot—in the same league with Ho Chi Minh—but because Diem would not accept the Party's leadership they had to use their propaganda apparatus to try to discredit him with the people.

A careful reading of the *Pentagon Papers* establishes that Diem was certainly not the "America puppet" he was often accused of being, and in my view history has shown that he was right more often than he was wrong in his disputes with Americans. To mention but one example, Diem argued that he was going to face a guerrilla insurgency rather than the Korea-style invasion across the 17th parallel predicted by the Americans. Thus, South Vietnam needed a smaller and more elite military. But the Americans conditioned their military assistance upon his acceptance of their advice.

It might take a short book to address all of the errors and omissions of the Burns-Novick film. They had seventeen hours to make their case. How could they have totally ignored the decisive, self-inflicted blow that ultimately led to a Communist victory—the May 1973 vote by Congress making it unlawful to spend treasury funds on combat operations by U.S. armed forces anywhere in Indochina. Writing in *Foreign Affairs* in early 2005, Yale History Professor John Lewis Gaddis—often called "the Dean of American Cold War historians"—noted: "Historians now acknowledge that American counter-insurgency operations in Vietnam were succeeding during the final years" of the conflict.¹⁷ That was certainly my perception while traveling throughout South Vietnam during 1970-1971, and the view was shared by a large number of friends with extensive experience in country, including Douglas Pike and Bill Colby (later to serve as Director of Central Intelligence at the CIA). In our view, in 1973 Congress threw in the towel and essentially snatched defeat from the jaws of victory. North Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong responded by declaring: "The Americans won't come back now even if we offered them candy." Hanoi then conquered South Vietnam through conventional aggression behind columns of Soviet-made tanks that would have been easy targets for American airpower; but cuts in American military aid left South Vietnamese aircraft grounded without fuel, spare parts, or ammunition.

To mention but one more of the many problems raised by Episode One, the documentary claimed the casualties of the war included "tens of thousands" who died "in neighboring states of Laos and Cambodia."¹⁸ In tiny Cambodia alone, the Yale University Cambodian Genocide Program estimated that in the first three years following "liberation," the Cambodian Communists (Khmer Rouge, or "Red Cambodians") killed 1.7 million people—more than twenty percent of the nation's entire population.¹⁹ This error is of particular significance because it points out the limitations from perceiving this conflict as the "Vietnam War" rather than the "Second Indochina War," and it fails to recognize the reality that the idealism of Marxism is virtually always accompanied by intense brutality and countless deaths.²⁰ While precise figures are difficult to establish, more people may have died in the first three years after the war than were killed in combat during the previous fourteen years throughout Indochina. At minimum, many hundreds of thousands from the former South Vietnam died as "boat people," from executions, and in "reeducation camps" and "new economic zones." Although anti-Vietnam protesters promised that an end to American aid would lead to an "end to the killing" and the improvement of "human rights" in Vietnam, they were tragically wrong on both counts. Indeed, the respected human rights organization Freedom House declared in 1978 that the unified Socialist Republic of Vietnam was "as free as Korea (North), less free than China (Mainland)."²¹

In a betrayal of John F. Kennedy's inaugural pledge, the American Congress—under strong pressure from the so-called "peace movement"—was not willing to "pay any price . . . to assure the survival and the success of Liberty." The Burns-Novick documentary fails to convey that truth.

¹⁷ John Lewis Gaddis, "Bush and the World, Take 2," *Foreign Affairs*, Jan-Feb 2005.

¹⁸ Transcript (https://wiki.vvfh.org/index.php/Annotated_Transcript_of_Episode_1) Caption 124 ff.

¹⁹ Yale University, Cambodian Genocide Program, <https://gsp.yale.edu/case-studies/cambodian-genocide-program>.

²⁰ *The Black Book of Communism* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1999) estimates that, during the twentieth century, Communism slaughtered between 80 and 100 million human beings.

²¹ Freedom House, *Annual Survey of Freedom 1978* p. 321.

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