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*Review Essay*  
Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's *The Vietnam War*

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True confessions: I did not go into the eighteen hours of Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's *The Vietnam War* with a totally open mind.<sup>1</sup> Burns's 1990 documentary series *The Civil War*, which made his career, had evoked a storm of controversy, with such leading historians as Leon Litwack and Eric Foner offering scathing critiques of how the film depicted African Americans as passive victims and entirely ignored the ways in which the postwar era of Reconstruction became an exercise in white supremacy. As Foner wrote, "Faced with a choice between historical illumination or nostalgia, Burns consistently opts for nostalgia."<sup>2</sup> Subsequent documentaries on jazz and World War II always struck me, and in fact many critics, as deliberately skirting potentially subversive counter-narratives in a kind of burnishing of the past.<sup>3</sup> And to be quite honest, all of them seemed too long. In the case of Burns and Novick's earlier series *The War* (2007) and its fifteen-hour embrace of the greatest generation narrative, Burns's insular documentary painted World War II as an entirely American affair, with non-white and non-American voices largely to the side. The much-heralded "Ken Burns effect" had never worked its magic on me.

When I began to hear the tagline for *The Vietnam War* in the drumbeat of publicity before it was first aired on PBS last September (you will have to conjure up the melancholy Peter Coyote voiceover as you read)—"*It was begun in good faith by decent people out of fateful misunderstandings, American overconfidence, and Cold War miscalculations*"—I anticipated a painful eighteen hours. It was not entirely to be. I have reservations, some serious, about Burns and Novick's *Vietnam War*. It is a documentary that elides the structural reasons for U.S. intervention in Vietnam and instead concentrates on the ways in which Americans experienced war. And despite an effort to help viewers understand Vietnamese dimensions of the war, it is mainly unsuccessful at evoking the complexities of Vietnam's past. But I want to start by crediting Burns and Novick for what I think they get right.

Throughout the ten episodes of *The Vietnam War*, they tell powerful individual sto-

<sup>1</sup> *The Vietnam War*, directed by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, 10 episodes (PBS, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Eric Foner, "Ken Burns and the Romance of Reunion," in Robert Brent Toplin, ed., *Ken Burns's The Civil War: Historians Respond* (New York, 1996), 101–118, here 112.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, David Hajdu, "Not Quite All That Jazz," *New York Review of Books*, February 8, 2001; and Alessandra Stanley, "What So Proudly We Hailed," *New York Times*, September 21, 2007.

ries that bring us into the quotidian dimensions of the American war in Vietnam in far more compelling ways than I have seen many other documentaries or books on Vietnam do.<sup>4</sup> We meet dozens of Americans who fought in or whose lives were affected by the conflict: soldiers, civilians, nurses, chaplains, parents, brothers and sisters, anti-war and pro-war activists, and some, though not so many, diplomats and generals. One is Denton W. "Mogie" Crocker Jr., whose story and that of his conservative Catholic family is refracted through sustained interviews across various episodes with his mother, Jean Marie, and his sister Carol. Those interviews best capture the impressive work that Burns and Novick can do with stories, sounds, and images.

An awkward and bookish adolescent, Mogie Crocker ran away from home when his parents refused to let him join the military, returning only when they agreed to allow him to be inducted into the army. His concern with communism in Vietnam and elsewhere, his mother said, came from reading *Henry V*. It made him, she said, "want to be part of something important and brave."<sup>5</sup> Mogie arrived in Vietnam with the 101st Airborne in 1965. He saw difficult combat, and gradually his enthusiasm for the war began to wane, though he never directly communicated those feelings in letters home. In one exceptionally moving incident, we see his family in a local television studio decked out with a set connoting a living room at Christmas, complete with an aluminum tree. The station had offered families the opportunity to record holiday greetings for service members in Vietnam. We see Mogie's parents and three siblings all extend their video greetings. Burns and Novick let us feel what Mogie's sister Carol later calls "[t]he awkwardness, the sadness, the strangeness" of the moment.<sup>6</sup>

Mogie Crocker was killed in a campaign in the Central Highlands in June 1966, one day after his nineteenth birthday. Almost fifty years later, his mother and sister are still unable to come to terms with his death. His mother recalls her decision to have Mogie buried at Arlington National Cemetery, saying, "a corner of my heart knew that if he were buried near us, I would want to claw the ground to retrieve the warmth of him."<sup>7</sup> The extended interviews with his mother and sister make clear to viewers how deep, how ambiguous, and how painful the enduring legacies of the Vietnam War continue to be for many Americans. That might sound sentimental, or overly emotional. But the palpable rawness of their pain has to be felt to be understood. Burns and Novick help us feel it.

Individuals enter *The Vietnam War* in other ways, too, notably through taped conversations about Vietnam policy in the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations. The strategic use of the tapes by Burns and Novick puts to rest any fears that *The Vietnam War* might be an exercise in "balance." There is very little Vietnam revisionism here: Vietnam is not the "winnable" war or the "noble cause," as Lewis Sorley, Max Boot, or former Trump national security advisor H. R. McMaster would mistakenly have it.<sup>8</sup> Instead, the wider narrative arc fits the conclusion of most academic historians

<sup>4</sup> An exception is Christian G. Appy's wonderful oral history *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides* (New York, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> "The River Styx (January 1964–December 1965)," episode 3 of Burns and Novick, *The Vietnam War*; quote from the companion volume, Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns, *The Vietnam War: An Intimate History* (New York, 2017), 98.

<sup>6</sup> "The River Styx"; quote from Ward and Burns, *The Vietnam War*, 143.

<sup>7</sup> "Resolve (January 1966–June 1967)," episode 4; quote from Ward and Burns, *The Vietnam War*, 174.

<sup>8</sup> Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York, 1999); Max Boot, *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American*

that the war was a mistake. Well-chosen excerpts from the White House tapes let viewers hear for themselves that the presidents who took the United States deeper into the war knew that to be the case, too. This private duplicity is equal-opportunity and crosses parties. Just before his fateful decision to send two battalions of Marines to Da Nang in March 1965, we hear President Lyndon B. Johnson telling his close friend Senator Richard Russell on the telephone: “I don’t know, Dick . . . a man can fight if he can see daylight down the road somewhere. But there ain’t no daylight in Vietnam. There’s not a bit.”<sup>9</sup> We also hear President Richard M. Nixon, days after his acceptance speech at the 1972 Republican National Convention, in which he pledged that the U.S. would never abandon South Vietnam, say privately to Henry Kissinger, “Because I look at the tide of history out there, South Vietnam can probably never even survive.” Yes, Kissinger replies, “we’ve got to find some formula that holds the thing together a year or two, after which . . . Vietnam will be a backwater.”<sup>10</sup> In a sense, Burns and Novick use the tapes to let the American state hang itself.

They also remind us of some uncomfortable truths about public opinion and the war. Burns and Novick’s treatment of the anti-war movement has perhaps predictably drawn criticism from former members of the movement who do not feel that their contributions to ending the war are fully acknowledged. But in fact on the whole, the portrayal of participants in the anti-war movement in *The Vietnam War* is quite sympathetic. Burns and Novick offer an extended treatment of the infamous incident at Kent State in which members of the Ohio National Guard opened fire on students demonstrating against the war, killing two young women and two young men. The film footage is especially striking here, both the savageness of the Guard attack and the efforts of a senior geology professor, his voice hoarse and cracking, “begging” the students to disperse to avoid an even greater “slaughter.”<sup>11</sup> It is difficult to come away from Burns and Novick’s portrayal of Kent State without being outraged at the actions of the Guard and sympathetic to the students. But then they offer a disturbing twist, telling us that in polls following the incident, a majority of Americans blamed the anti-war protesters at Kent State, rather than the National Guardsmen who shot them, for the loss of life.

The ways in which the tapes and public opinion function in *The Vietnam War*, however, also begin to get at its larger interpretive limitations. Burns and Novick never get beyond individual agency to offer structural explanations for why the United States intervened in Vietnam in the first place and for how the war shaped state and society in the two Vietnams. Instead we get bromides: “good faith” efforts by “decent people,” “misunderstandings,” “miscalculations.” If there is any structural agency, it is the often invoked but never interrogated Cold War, which seemingly drops down on the world from nowhere in the wake of World War II and eventually sets the Vietnam War in motion. Once the French could not cope with a colonial conflict turned anti-communist war, Burns and Novick appear to suggest, what else, really, could the U.S. do but step

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*Tragedy in Vietnam* (New York, 2018); H. R. McMaster, *Derelection of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York, 1999). Sorley is a talking head in *The Vietnam War*, but his perspectives remain singular.

<sup>9</sup> “The River Styx”; quote from Ward and Burns, *The Vietnam War*, 116.

<sup>10</sup> “A Disrespectful Loyalty (May 1970–March 1973),” episode 9; quote from Ward and Burns, *The Vietnam War*, 508.

<sup>11</sup> “The History of the World (April 1969–May 1970),” episode 8; quote from Ward and Burns, *The Vietnam War*, 451.

in? Strikingly, episode 1, “Déjà Vu,” a brisk walk from 1858 to 1961, never pauses to notice that the American war in Vietnam was not the first time the United States got to Asia. The American empire in the Philippines and U.S. participation in the Pacific War, the Chinese Civil War, and the Korean War get only passing mention.

We never hear a discussion of how American empire and the broader political, economic, and cultural complexities of the making of twentieth-century American global hegemony were bound up in the U.S. intervention in Vietnam. Questions of race and racism are only lightly addressed. The failure to probe the Philippine case is particularly troubling given the new scholarship on the American war in the Philippines and its aftermath by Paul Kramer and others, one that clearly destabilizes notions of “decency” or “misunderstandings” as plausible casual agents for U.S. engagement in the colonial world.<sup>12</sup>

The *why* problem extends to how *The Vietnam War* treats the Vietnamese sides of the war as well. Burns and Novick have been congratulated on their willingness to include Vietnamese voices in the series. And they do, featuring Vietnamese from both the south and north in terms that can often be quite critical of both the northern and southern regimes. This is to their credit. But I do not want to give them more credit than is due. *The Vietnam War* remains an American show.

Interviews with Vietnamese soldiers, diplomats, writers, and villagers never feel as three-dimensional as those with the Americans. With the exception of an extended conversation across several episodes around Mai Elliott, whose important book *The Sacred Willow* is among the essential Vietnamese memoirs of the war, many of the interviews fall flat.<sup>13</sup> The subaltern, to borrow Gayatri Spivak’s formulation, can’t seem to speak. It is not the fault of their Vietnamese subjects. Burns and Novick simply do not have the same ability they do with Americans to get inside the potentially very compelling Vietnamese voices they bring to the screen.

That may be because the historical context in which the plurality of Vietnamese actors operated is only diffusely conveyed in *The Vietnam War*. The portrait that Burns and Novick offer of state and society in North Vietnam has its strengths, particularly the attention they accord to cleavages in the top leadership and to the increasingly symbolic rather than policy significance of Ho Chi Minh after 1960. But the everyday experiences of wartime in the north are handled lightly. With South Vietnam we get the usual picture of a rotating band of increasingly ineffectual political leaders, but never a sense of how southern civil society operated. When South Vietnamese young and old take to the streets—and Burns and Novick usefully remind us that they did so over and over again in the 1960s and early 1970s—what kind of Vietnam were they looking for? We never come to know.

There is a new historical literature on the South Vietnamese state and society that would have helped Burns and Novick to approach these questions in more nuanced ways, but there is no evidence of its use in *The Vietnam War*. In their depiction of the Buddhist crisis that brought down the government of Ngô Đình Diệm, for example,

<sup>12</sup> Paul A. Kramer, *The Blood of Governments: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2006); Julian Go and Anne L. Foster, *The American Colonial State in the Philippines: Global Perspectives* (Durham, N.C., 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Mai Elliott, *The Sacred Willow: Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family*, 2nd ed. (New York, 2017).

they follow a standard narrative that would have been familiar to war correspondents of the period as events unfolded in 1963. In doing so, they ignore the work of one of their own historical advisors, who has written a seminal account of Diệm and his family in which the heterodox religiosity of southern Vietnam, including Buddhism, Catholicism, and folk millenarianism, emerges as a critical variable in South Vietnamese political culture and the fall of Diệm.<sup>14</sup> More broadly still, recent interpretive accounts of the larger sweep of Vietnamese history that put the wartime period in transformative new perspectives go unnoticed by Burns and Novick.<sup>15</sup>

Beyond these substantive limitations, the visual style and form of *The Vietnam War* feels tired. It is worth asking whether this very traditional form of documentary filmmaking still does the kind of work it may have done some three decades ago. In 1990, the total audience for Burns's *The Civil War* was more than 14 million viewers. It was still the age of network television and "must see" television. It is a bit tricky to piece together the viewership for *The Vietnam War*. A PBS press release puts the number somewhat vaguely at 7 million on average.<sup>16</sup> Whatever the hard numbers, in a segmented media market increasingly defined by new and social media, the rollout of *The Vietnam War* on PBS felt very late-twentieth-century. So too its sometimes clunky production values. Every time we hear the White House tapes, and they are used with some frequency, Burns and Novick cut to an old reel-to-reel tape player sitting on a period table. Mentions of meetings of Hanoi's Politburo repeatedly conjure up the same staged shot of what appear to be Ho Chi Minh's spectacles on a drab conference table. The power of a protracted and often surprising consideration of an American POW who was held in southern Vietnam is undercut by the recurrent use of music designed to evoke anxiety and fear that uncomfortably recalls the satirical soundscapes of *The Blair Witch Project*. It is not so much that Burns and Novick do not have the visual sophistication of an Errol Morris or an Ava DuVernay, although they do not. One eventually begins to wonder about the audience. Who, in the end, watches eighteen hours of often flat documentary filmmaking with individual episodes as long as ninety minutes each? Precise age breakdowns of viewers are difficult to work out, but I am guessing that few people under the age of thirty paid much attention to *The Vietnam War*. Only a handful of my students did. Its unwieldy length makes it almost impossible to use in the classroom.

Burns did not much care for the critiques historians offered of *The Civil War* more than twenty years ago, suggesting that contemporary historical writing had become "so bogged down in statistical demographics and micro-perceptions" that it was increasingly like reading the phonebook.<sup>17</sup> It should be acknowledged that whatever its generational and substantive limitations, Burns has considerably larger audiences for his docu-

<sup>14</sup> Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, Mass., 2013).

<sup>15</sup> See in particular Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (New York, 2016); and Ben Kiernan, *Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present* (New York, 2017). For a useful overview of recent work in Vietnamese studies, see the roundtable "The Transformation of Vietnamese Studies since the 1980s: Essays in Honor of Hue-Tam Ho Tai," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 12, no. 3 (2017): 1–63.

<sup>16</sup> On viewership for *The Civil War*, see Bill Carter, "'Civil War' Sets an Audience Record for PBS," *New York Times*, September 25, 1990, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/09/25/movies/civil-war-sets-an-audience-record-for-pbs.html>; for *The Vietnam War*, see "Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's *The Vietnam War* Seen by 39 Million Viewers," PBS press release, April 12, 2018, <http://www.pbs.org/about/blogs/news/ken-burns-and-lynn-novicks-the-vietnam-war-seen-by-39-million-viewers/>.

<sup>17</sup> Ken Burns, "Four O'Clock in the Morning Courage," in Toplin, *Ken Burns's The Civil War*, 153–183, here 175.

mentaries than most members of the American Historical Association have for any of our books. My hunch is that Burns will not be particularly bothered by critiques from academic historians of *The Vietnam War*. But a serious problem remains: How might we as historians, and documentarians like Burns, find more compelling ways to tell Vietnam to our students? Eighteen hours in, literally in the very last minutes of the final episode, Peter Coyote tells us, "The Vietnam War was a tragedy, immeasurable and irredeemable. But meaning can be found in the individual stories of those who lived through it, stories of courage and comradeship and perseverance, of understanding and forgiveness."<sup>18</sup>

There are different ways to make meaning of individual lives and the structures of the past. Burns and Novick show us one way. The stories they tell about Vietnam are necessary but not sufficient. To be fully understood, the Vietnam wars need other kinds of stories, too. Like this one. In 1973, the Hanoi-based Vietnamese artist Tran Trung Tin made a painting. With materials in wartime northern Vietnam scarce, Tin painted not on canvas but over a page of the party daily *Nhan Dan*. Despite the wash applied by the painter, he lets us see newsprint in the background. In the work, titled *Mother Holds Her Child's Hand*, both mother and child are rendered in a warm brownish red as nude abstractions. In form and content, the painting violated many of the official strictures about wartime art in the north: abstraction and nudity were prohibited; so too figures of female vulnerability at a time when the nationalist bombast of social realism held sway. Tellingly, *Mother Holds Her Child's Hand* was not shown publicly in Vietnam until 1989. For Tin, its style allowed him not only to put a distance between himself and the state, but perhaps even more importantly to recover an intimate moment in a time of war, one not easily captured in documents, most memoirs, or more conventional documentaries. The visual language of the painting conveys a kind of tenderness and joy buried deep within the complexities and uncertainties of the wartime era.<sup>19</sup> We need stories like these, stories that tell us more not only about Vietnamese experiences of war, but about why the wars for Vietnam must be situated in a world historical understanding of the past in which we recognize the humanity of all who were its victims.

<sup>18</sup> "The Weight of Memory (March 1973–Onward)," episode 10; quote from Ward and Burns, *The Vietnam War*, 587.

<sup>19</sup> Tran Trung Tin, *Mother Hold Her Child's Hand*, 1973, oil on newsprint, National Gallery Singapore, accession no. 2002-00295. My discussion here draws upon the curator notes for this painting at the National Gallery.

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