

Review of Ken Burns' Series on the Vietnam War, October 2017

With major funding from the Bank of America and David Koch, Burns has tried to position himself as the definitive film historian on the Vietnam War.

While Ken Burns' series of ten TV shows has some strengths, it was mainly told through the eyes of pro-war American soldiers and marines and their families. Some of them eventually turned against the war, but that comes late in the series.

Burns briefly mentions Col. Robert Heinl's 1971 report on "The Collapse of the US Armed Forces in Vietnam" and the fraggings of gung-ho officers (with fragmentation grenades) who were ordering soldiers out on suicidal missions. Heinl also reports that there were 144 underground anti-war GI newspapers in South Vietnam in 1971. Burns does not describe and analyse these important events in any detail.

More information about the widespread collapse of the U.S. Army, Marines, Air Force and Navy would have undermined the patriotic narratives of the veterans that Burns relies on so heavily. Along with the stubborn resistance of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and the People's Liberation Armed Forces (which the U.S military derisively called the Viet Cong), the U.S. government was forced to withdraw its dispirited, drug-ridden military forces in order to preserve and reorganize them into a volunteer army.

While he conducts one of his primary interviews with a conflicted Black marine from Roxbury, Burns minimizes the role of anti-war African-American GIs. Thousands of Black soldiers and marines were imprisoned at LBJ Prison in South Vietnam on charges of mutiny, circulating issues of the Black Panther and other anti-war newspapers, and engineering truces with the NVA and the PLAF. Disproportionately high numbers Black soldiers and marines served in combat units and suffered high rates of casualties. (See David Cortwright, "Black GI Resistance During the Vietnam War," in *Vietnam Generation*, 1990, Vol. 2. No.1, pp. 33-39.)

Burns does a good job of telling the story of the My Lai massacre. In 1968, more than 500 civilians were murdered by a company of the Americal Division led by Lt. William Calley, while an army general monitored the massacre from a helicopter. After a year long cover-up, only 30 officers and soldiers were brought up on charges that were dropped soon thereafter. Calley received a sentence of life imprisonment for premeditated murder of Vietnamese civilians, but ultimately served 40 months in jail from the comfort of his own quarters before he was pardoned.

However, Burns' narrative about My Lai is undermined by the testimony of several veterans who claim that U.S. atrocities were few and far between during the war. This is not tenable, given the official emphasis on "body counts" that encouraged U.S. soldiers and marines to kill South Vietnamese civilians in "free-fire zones" and "search-and-destroy missions." (See *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* by Nick Turse (2013).

Burns includes some footage of the antiwar movement. But he falls into the misleading narrative of pitting the "violent" against the "peaceful" movements. Like other mainstream

historians, Burns is fixated on the isolated actions of the tiny Weather Underground. In fact, there was a spectrum of anti-war organizing, as was evident at Stop the Draft Week at the Oakland Induction Center in October 1967. The pacifist first day was followed by mobile tactics that shut down much of downtown Oakland's streets. And what about the anti-war sit-ins and building takeovers by white and Black students at major universities from 1966 to 1970? They broke the law; were they "peaceful"?

Burns' methodology is demonstrated in footage of an action by Vietnam Veterans Against the War throwing back their medals at the Capitol in 1971. He edits out the final statement by a Marine: "If we ever come back again, it will be to take these steps."

Burns provides footage of the shooting of four students at Kent State who were protesting against the invasion of Cambodia in 1970. Ohio National Guardsmen fired live rounds at peaceful student demonstrators. One of Burns' interviewees sums this up as an "American tragedy" in which "young soldiers faced young students." In this and other segments of the series, Burns reaches for an illusory "balance" between pro-war and anti-war forces.

His footage emphasizes the presence of American flags in the anti-war demonstrations while criticizing protesters who held the flag of the National Liberation Front, which had the support of the majority of the South Vietnamese population throughout the war. In the TV series, Jane Fonda's courageous trips to Hanoi at the height of the bombing and the war are bitterly criticized by Burns' veterans. Burns focuses on one statement by Fonda that captured pilots should be treated as war criminals under the Geneva Convention, not POWs since there was no U.S. declaration of war.

Burns provides some brief shots of the American bombing of Hanoi, but does not investigate the impact of carpet bombing by B-52 pilots on millions of civilians in Hanoi and elsewhere in North Vietnam. In large part because of U.S. bombing of both North and South Vietnam, an estimated two to three million Vietnamese civilians perished due to U.S. military action between 1961 and 1975.

On the positive side, Burns interviews an Air Force pilot who had bombed the Ho Chi Minh Trail (called Route 559 by the Vietnamese). He admires the Vietnamese men and women who kept the supplies and weapons moving to the South in the face of death and extreme deprivation. This pilot concludes that the U.S. was on the wrong side of a civil war. This argument does not appear elsewhere in the series. An accurate history of the Vietnam War would have developed this essential point from the beginning of the U.S. military intervention under JFK in 1961.

While Burns claims that he tells the stories of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese fighters, Burns' narrator repeatedly refers to them as "the enemy." In Burns' series they are a side-show to the American narratives and are "balanced" by U.S.-backed South Vietnamese leaders and soldiers. First Secretary Le Duan, General Vo Nguyen Diap and the North Vietnamese Politburo (of the Vietnamese Workers Party) are demonized, while Ho Chi Minh is portrayed as a reasonable enemy. This is a superficial anti-communist history which interviews some NVA veterans while attacking their leaders.

This is really a TV series about the U.S. War in Vietnam, mainly told by pro-war American soldiers and veterans, not about the Vietnam War as a whole. It will not be a useful educational tool in the future.

Here are some films on the anti-war movement and the Vietnam War as a whole:

- Sir! No Sir!--The Suppressed Story of the GI Movement to End the War in Vietnam (84 mins., 2006)
- The War at Home (The anti-war movement at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, 100 mins., 1979)
- Winter Soldier (Testimony of members of Vietnam Veterans Against the War on January 31-February 2, 1971 on U.S. atrocities in South Vietnam, Winterfilm, 1972)
- Vietnam's Unseen War: Pictures from the Other Side (National Geographic, 60 mins., 2002)
- Battle for Dien Bien Phu: Prelude to the Vietnam War (The French colonial defeat in 1954, while receiving billions of dollars in U.S. military aid, 60 mins., 2005)