The War That Never Ends

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Articles & Testimony

The Vietnam War gets Ken Burns's signature "docutainment" treatment, and the result is a worthy one, if not always up to full scholarly standards.

Ken Burns' and Lynn Novick's *The Vietnam War* series, a 900-minute extravaganza written by Geoffrey C. Ward that began airing on PBS on September 17, and that took ten years to complete, is an extraordinary effort to, among other things, educate Americans younger than 60 about a sequence of events that remains eerily familiar for many Americans older than 60. It is not the filmmakers' intent to provide a final judgment on the war; rather they wish to show what happened from many perspectives: the decision-makers, with their strategic political choices; the public, with their responses to those choices; and a wide array of nations and representative individuals whom the war impacted. In other words, their method for presenting a fair and unbiased portrait of what remains to this day a controversial and divisive subject is to present in rough balance the biases of others.

That is the series' strength -- besides which, it was the only way to convince millions of viewers to watch more than 15 hours of American history and justify the cost of the lengthy project: $30 million. In a sense, *The Vietnam War* is the latest example, only larger, of Ken Burns's series of docutainment hits, some of them about serious historical episodes like World War II and the Civil War, some about less momentous subjects like Prohibition, and still others about cultural artifacts like baseball and jazz. All of them have been captivating and have shown high production quality. The formula clearly works, at least for commercial purposes.

One example of *The Vietnam War*'s lateral commercial impact is that novelist and Vietnam Vet Tim O'Brien's 1990 work on soldiers in Vietnam, *The Things They Carried*, just appeared on the *Washington Post* Top Ten bestseller list (October 28). The fact that *The Vietnam War* has been a boon for fiction about the war is cautionary, perhaps. No one ought to expect scholar-level history from a television series. The key medium of television, after all, is the picture (the series draws from 24,000 photographs and 1,500 hours of archival footage), not text. Such a presentation is bound to rely more on the evocation of emotion than on cold reason. And the writer, a frequent Burns collaborator

over the years, though sometimes described as an historian, has only an undergraduate degree. And the series's soundtrack, made up of classic "oldies," is of course available for purchase.

But by following the series, whatever its frailty as serious history, Americans nevertheless come face to face with a range of controversial policy issues woven into the larger narrative, some of which remain relevant in the contemporary context. That policy story, and the larger lessons of Vietnam with them, have to be stitched together by the viewer. This is a task for which not all viewers are created equal in terms of experience or interest. That, in turn, will color one's perceptions of bias in the series.

Given the still-lingering controversies and divisions associated with the Vietnam War, any treatment would encounter some accusations of bias, and the more extreme the views of the accuser, the more energetic the accusation. The Burns/Novick effort has been thusly challenged, but the criticisms more or less balance out. All told, is it fair to all sides, or at least is everyone's point of view included? In my view, generally yes. Did Burns and Novick, while mostly avoiding political lectures, illustrate that the war from the American perspective was a mistake, and certainly badly run? Yes, but given that America's specific goal in Vietnam -- keeping the country from falling to North Vietnam -- was not achieved, it is hard to see how any honest account could escape that obvious conclusion.

The exception is the series's ninth episode, covering the 1970–73 period, in which Burns and Novick undercut the credibility of their more general, reasonably balanced observations. The narrative of that episode dryly describes the triumphs President Richard Nixon achieved in 1972, diplomatically with China, the USSR, and North Vietnam, politically in the presidential election, and militarily with the defeat of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) in the Easter Offensive. But this comes only after 100 minutes of almost unceasing negatives on the war: from a Vietnam Veterans Against the War-heavy focus on the minority of veterans who bitterly opposed to it to Jane Fonda in Hanoi, John Kerry's Senate testimony, drug-addicted U.S. soldiers, the Pentagon Papers, My Lai, and extensive footage of South Vietnamese army (ARVN) troops retreating in Laos and initially in the Easter Offensive (although ARVN soldiers won that battle). The plurality of Americans still supporting the war, which in that period included most veterans, got little airtime. A viewer could easily ask whether Burns and Novick were describing the same country that gave Nixon an overwhelming victory in 49 states in the 1972 election.

The Vietnam War covers, at times with new information, the well-known, seemingly unique aspects of the conflict: the antiwar movement; the pervasiveness of falsehoods, particularly those manufactured by Washington and the U.S. military; and the challenges a democracy faces in fighting an unconventional "war of choice" in the media age. Apart from the resistance such a war generates in the home country, it has a built-in military downside. Viet Cong and NVA combatants who were interviewed stated consistently that they fought to repel a foreign invader. As one of their foes, heroic South Vietnamese Marine officer Tran Ngoc Toan, stated in one interview, the entry of American ground troops generated ten Vietcong partisans for every one who had been active before. LBJ's and Nixon's seeming inability to tell the truth to the American people, and the impact that lack of candor had on the war effort, is covered well, but the series reveals a similar tendency in Hanoi's approach to its population, ranging from characterizing the 1968 Tet Offensive as a victory to refusing to reveal casualties or to inform families of them in a timely manner.

But beyond Vietnam-specific lessons, *The Vietnam War* lays out in a non-didactic, illustrative manner strategic truths of great import, including for us today. The four that matter most are about containment, incremental versus major war tactics, definitions of victory, and the criticality of determination in conflict.

CONTRADICTIONS OF CONTAINMENT

In watching *The Vietnam War*, a viewer, hearing American officials pondering options, is tempted to burst out "stop, no, make the other choice." But those making decisions did not know how the story would turn out. They

had to act with the experiences they had lived through, not those we have accumulated since, based on imperfect knowledge and the typical set of "all bad" options. Those experiences, brought out by *The Vietnam War* in excerpts particularly with Presidents Johnson and Nixon, were from World War II and the Cold War. Their formula to avoid a repeat of the former, and to win the latter, was containment. *The Vietnam War* does not discuss containment as such except marginally, but it is palpable in the statements of American leaders. At one point Johnson bursts out, "they (the Communists) keep coming at you," illustrating containment's logic: You have to fight them, so better *now* and *there*. At another point Johnson, fearing escalation, summoned the specter of Korea (while generally understood at the time as a containment "success," that war ended in stalemate, with 35,000 Americans killed and Truman's opting against running for another term). Johnson was prescient.

A "yin/yang" dynamic characterized containment. To avoid unthinkable world war, the U.S. government waged less costly and risky "wars of choice" in which, because the local stakes were not high, the commitment would be limited and unenthusiastic, while that of its local adversary would be total. The result was usually ambiguous, compromise endings. One cannot understand Johnson entering the conflict, or Nixon trying to get out, without grasping the agonizing pickle they were in. You could shut down engagement in Vietnam, but they would "keep coming at you," possibly more lethally (the Cuban missile crisis was fresh in everyone's mind).

Containment was a global defensive strategy. Its alternative, "rollback," had been rejected near the onset. Clausewitz wrote that defense is the stronger strategy, but with a "negative" outcome; it prevents defeat but does not win and thus was unappealing to Americans then steeped in notions of "total victory." It also allowed the other side to choose time and place, usually when and where the West was weakest. As *The Vietnam War* discusses well, the jury-rigged South Vietnamese state, created after the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) predecessor, the Viet Minh, defeated the French, was just such a vulnerable prey.

In illustrating that the Vietnam War was not so much international aggression as a civil war in a place of at most middling strategic importance, the series highlights containment's contradictions. But these contradictions were characteristic of containment as a whole. Most Cold War conflicts involved either divided countries (beyond Vietnam, Korea, China, and Germany) or internal conflicts with communists on one side and America on the other, from Cuba to Greece to Indonesia. From a traditional power politics standpoint, none were vital. But for these "greatest generation" American leaders, World War II was caused by the previous generation's ducking low-cost engagement in equally unimportant places, Ethiopia, Manchukuo, the Sudetenland, Austria, only then to have to fight existential struggles in important places.

Could Burns and Novick have spelled all this out better? Perhaps, but the series is on Vietnam, not the Cold War. Unfortunately, the most detailed exposition of containment in *The Vietnam War* is presented by its original proponent, George Kennan, before the Senate in 1967. But Kennan had abandoned his taste for containment well before Vietnam and disdained extending it to distant, minor showplaces, arguing that America was "like an elephant frightened by a mouse."

The problem was that some of the mice were on our side. Along with defending a perimeter, containment was centered on collective security. This had both a practical logic, that the whole is stronger than the sum of the parts, and a legal-moral one: The sanctity of sovereignty under international law for the weak as well as the strong has been a fundament for world peace since Wilson. Furthermore, even America's most powerful allies were "mice" compared to the U.S. elephant, and abandoning one would likely unsettle all the others, along with the smaller but still important sinews of collective security. At one point, Johnson, obviously frustrated with Saigon, mused that the United States should pull back to Thailand. Those around him undoubtedly knew that wasn't a solution. The communists would follow us there, and Thailand offered the same tableau: ineffective, undemocratic government in an unimportant place. Containment would therefore have been undercut by abandoning the Vietnamese "mouse."

INCREMENTALISM CAN'T WIN WARS

Another strength of the series is the light it shines on the Johnson Administration's preference for escalatory baby steps rather than major military moves. American advisers could accompany South Vietnamese combat troops but not fight themselves. Marine infantry battalions initially could defend bases but not take the offensive. The U.S. Army First Cavalry Division late in 1965 did receive a combat mission -- defeat an invading NVA division in the Central Highlands -- but once it succeeded it was blocked from pursuing the enemy across the Cambodian border. And in the ensuing two years America increased forces slowly, in contrast to the build ups of 300,000 or more ground troops within six months in the Korean and 1990–91 Gulf Wars.

Likewise with the temporary, half-hearted ceasefires and bombing halts Johnson announced: None were significant before the enduring halt in 1968 that opened space for negotiations. Burns and Novick don't really explain Johnson's rationale beyond his generally skeptical attitude toward the war, but in general such military and diplomatic moves focus on "signaling" intentions while in themselves changing nothing, a low-risk low-return strategy that must have reassured Johnson, at least in the moment. However, there were many such moments, and the accumulation of them was anything but reassuring. In the minuet of deterrence diplomacy this can be useful, but once war begins, such signaling often produces the worst of all possible worlds: military fecklessness combined with a manifest lack of resolve. This was particularly true in conflicts such as Vietnam, in which the other side had absolute victory as a war goal. Only after repeated defeats and a U.S. withdrawal commitment did Hanoi give up its trump card, U.S. prisoners of war, for a "compromise" deal that held within a fair chance to win later.

In contrast, the series ably illustrates that in conflicts major moves have dramatic impact. But the nature of such effects was variable, from decisive victory to tactical victory, from tactical success, provoking an opponent's response, to failure.

The initial moves by North Vietnam and the United States were incremental: The United States, backing the non-communist regime in South Vietnam after the French Indochina War, and Hanoi, then launching an insurgency against that regime using its former Viet Minh cadre in the south. Gradually, successive U.S. Administrations (Eisenhower and Kennedy) added thousands of advisers, and North Vietnam stepped up weapons deliveries and the deployment of NVA soldiers in limited numbers, a tit-for-tat escalation without strategic success.

The first major move was political: the U.S.-approved military coup in 1963 against South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem, whose inept leadership provoked the Buddhist majority and contributed to military reversals. The result was failure, with two years of Saigon government chaos that demoralized the military and helped the Vietcong win much territory.

In 1964–65 Washington and Hanoi upped the stakes dramatically, putting regular ground forces into direct contact. The result was a tactical victory for the U.S. side, by reversing the creeping defeat of ARVN forces, but at the cost of a more deadly stalemate. In particular, as noted above in reference to Tran Ngoc Toan, the direct participation of U.S. forces in an attrition strategy transformed the psychology of the war for the communist side. It joined nationalist energies at ground level to communist ones at the leadership pinnacle, and the result was powerful.

Burns and Novick's coverage of the two sides' decision-making is thorough. U.S. actions, beginning with the 1964 Tonkin Gulf incident and culminating in ground combat units in offensive operations a year later, are well-covered territory, but the authors capture the reactive, feeling-in-the-dark nature of Johnson's decisions, with no enthusiasm and little idea of long-term positive consequences, but seemingly no choice. As U.S. diplomat John Negroponte made clear, only American troops could stem the disintegration of the ARVN and its losing battles like the one graphically portrayed at Binh Gia. Particularly impressive is the description of North Vietnamese decisions, with the USSR and North Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh arguing for a less aggressive approach, but Party General Secretary Le Duan,

backed by China, prevailing in his effort to commit major NVA forces to topple Saigon before America could respond. The depth of the divisions in the Communist Party was remarkable, suggesting the conflict could have taken a different path.

But both sides then pursued strategies unlikely to produce victory. *The Vietnam War* describes new U.S. commander Westmoreland's push in 1965 for a troop-heavy strategy of bleeding out the NVA along the borders, backed up by the massive bombing campaign against the north and the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos and Cambodia. The idea was to reach a "crossover," at which point the U.S. effort would be killing more NVA soldiers and destroying more equipment than Hanoi could replace. This sort of attrition approach had successful precedents (Grant's in the Civil War in particular), but it works only if the supply of enemy personnel and equipment is less than the casualties and damage the friendly side can inflict. Given the enormous mobilization of the North Vietnamese population and the support provided by Russia and China, that crossover point could not be reached even with 500,000 U.S. troops in the country. As *The Vietnam War* relates, two of Westmoreland's key subordinates, Marine Lieutenant General Victor Krulak and Army Lieutenant General Frederick Weyand, argued that U.S. troops should deploy to protect South Vietnam's populated areas, not go into the mountains, but Westmoreland persisted in his border areas campaign.

The bombing campaign was the least successful tactic of the war. It was hugely expensive, generated hundreds of U.S. POWs, added mightily to the "David versus Goliath" moral opprobrium of the war, and failed to either break North Vietnamese morale or interdict sufficient forces and supplies flowing South. That first goal has almost never been achieved by bombing. The second makes sense only when joined with a decisive ground campaign, such as Normandy, which was absent in Vietnam.

Hanoi, for its part, having little choice once U.S. ground forces had entered the conflict, pursued an extremely costly war of attrition in hopes of wearing down U.S. forces and the U.S. public, as had been the case with the French. But then in 1967 Hanoi and Washington, for various reasons, changed strategies, for the worst.

When it became clear to Westmoreland that the crossover attrition approach would not succeed, he shifted to "political attrition" to justify the same strategy of high casualty offensives against the NVA. The idea was that even if Hanoi could replace its horrendous losses it would lose the political will to do so. But while a military commander could measure "military attrition" well enough, attrition of another state's will was a political assessment beyond the ken of a military man. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, whose job it was to do such assessments, concluded in a secret letter to Johnson that the U.S. military would never break Hanoi's will, a conclusion that area experts in the U.S. government generally shared. It was a case, like many before and since, where the balance of interests trumps the balance of power.

Meanwhile, Hanoi leader Le Duan, over the objections of more cautious party elders, opted for the 1968 Tet Offensive, first to draw U.S. forces deeper into border mountains fighting NVA units, with the American base of Khe Sanh near the North-South Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) as bait, then to hurl the Vietcong and some NVA at cities far from the borders to spark popular uprisings and crush the ARVN -- despite no evidence that either outcome would occur.

Without doubt the Tet Offensive was the most significant move of the war before 1975. *The Vietnam War* covers Tet well from the perspectives of the Vietcong/NVA, the South Vietnamese, the U.S. military, the leadership in Washington, and American public opinion. While Tet was a turning point, its strategic effects were disparate and much debated, with the American military largely believing that public misunderstanding of Tet turned their victory into defeat. But the truth is more complex: What Tet did was change the nature of the war.

After Tet, the significance of the two previously dominant ground forces, the Vietcong and U.S. Army, began to fade, with the South Vietnamese and North Vietnamese regular armies becoming more and more the primary players.

This resulted first in dramatic success for the South Vietnamese through February 1973, aided by a U.S. military that was gradually returning to its pre-1965 roles of airpower, logistics, and advisers. But in the end Saigon was overrun in 1975 not by the Vietcong but by the NVA.

The destruction of the Vietcong was the result of Hanoi throwing that force against U.S. and ARVN firepower in Tet and follow-on offensives. Ironically the "crossover" point Westmoreland sought in vain with the NVA was thus attained against the Vietcong. Here *The Vietnam War* is particularly good, with Vietcong soldiers describing the growing odds against them, and at least indirectly justifying the American military's argument that it had won Tet.

Yet proximity to events blinded the U.S. military to North Vietnamese and Vietcong successes. As the series describes well, Saigon region commander Weyand's clever positioning of forces defeated the communists in the capital, but not before television footage of the apparent overrunning of the U.S. Embassy and nearby the execution of an unarmed man in civilian clothing shocked Americans. The cameras misled: The Embassy chancery building was never penetrated, and the "civilian" was an out-of-uniform Vietcong commando leader who had just murdered the wife and six children of an ARVN officer. But revulsion was immediate and the Administration's explanations were not believed.

One reason was that Tet had destroyed the credibility of the U.S. war effort. As the series recounts, to arrest sagging credibility in late 1967 Johnson had Westmoreland stress to a skeptical Congress and public that the war was being won because Communist will was being eroded. Tet, however, seemed to conclusively demonstrate the opposite.

This credibility never fully recovered from Westmoreland's mishandling of Tet. That reality (and much else underway in America in the terrible year of 1968) led Johnson to reverse course, denying Westmoreland's request for more troops, halting the bombing of North Vietnam, entering peace talks, and pulling the plug on his candidacy for re-election in November. From that standpoint Tet looked like a Hanoi victory; the decimation of the Vietcong did not become clear until later.

The political need for a new approach to the war enabled the Nixon Administration to adopt a more successful strategy. Entering office with a commitment to end the war, Nixon empowered the new American commander in Vietnam, Creighton Abrams, to carry out the radically different strategy of Vietnamization. As Burns and Novick also summarily recount, the new strategy had two elements: building up the South Vietnamese forces in numbers and capabilities; and defending the urban and major rural populations, drying up support for the communists and forcing them to go on the offensive against mass firepower. Even while primarily on defense, Abrams launched offensives into Cambodia and Laos to keep the NVA off balance, and into Vietcong strongholds with the controversial but effective Phoenix program. Unlike Westmoreland's offensives, Abrams's had strategic purpose: eroding NVA and Vietcong base areas to allow further U.S. troop withdrawals without losing battlefield momentum.

But as often in this war, tactical defeat stimulated a new, bigger bid to rescue victory from disaster: the North Vietnamese 1972 Easter Offensive by NVA regular divisions, which is very well covered by *The Vietnam War*. But that invasion, rather than collapsing the ARVN, pushed Nixon to respond dramatically, mining Haiphong harbor and sending B-52 bombers against Hanoi while leaving the ground fight to ARVN troops. The resulting major success, with few American casualties, was exploited to build relations with China and the Soviet Union while entering conclusive peace talks with Hanoi. When North Vietnam reneged on some of its foregoing agreements in December, Nixon unleashed the infamous "Christmas Bombing," which forced the North Vietnamese leadership to accept a compromise diplomatic settlement -- in the end a tactical victory for both sides.

The decisive move of the entire war turned out to be the NVA conventional invasion in 1975. The rapid collapse of the South Vietnamese forces would seem to suggest that victory was inevitable, but it was not. As the series recounts, the 1975 offensive was largely a carbon copy of the disastrous North Vietnamese invasion in 1972. But South

Vietnamese troops had won in 1972 because they were backed by massive U.S. air power and logistics. The U.S. Executive Branch, now led by Gerald Ford in the wake of Watergate, was blocked by Congress from assisting. The U.S. military provided virtually nothing to Saigon in 1975. When a few White House aides begged Ford to act anyway or risk losing all the foregoing years' efforts, Ford replied simply: "I'd be impeached."

Hanoi could not have been sure in advance that the U.S. government, which had promised in writing to support South Vietnamese President Thieu, would not act. But Le Duan bet that the Americans would not intervene effectively, and won the bet. So it was that the U.S. military came close to winning a very difficult unconventional war, only to lose by default a conventional one that would have been vastly easier for it to fight. Regrettably, *The Vietnam War* fails to clearly articulate this basic irony.

As noted above, Le Duan's roll of the dice in early 1975 achieved what he had failed to deliver earlier: victory. While congressional opposition to an American response to the NVA offensive largely explains why the NVA offensive in 1975 succeeded, another factor was in play: recognition that the core American rationale for Vietnam -- containing China -- was no longer necessary.

In a sense, then, the United States had won, if not in Vietnam, then in Asia as a whole. Beginning in 1972 China shifted from an anti-status quo Soviet ally into a near-partner of the United States, abandoning internal revolution and regional expansionism.

That expansionism had failed thanks largely to the U.S. effort in Southeast Asia. Successful for ten years after World War II in defeating the Nationalist Chinese, fighting America to a standstill in Korea, and aiding Ho Chi Minh against the U.S.-sponsored French, China and its protégés then ran out of luck: the 1950s Straits confrontation with the Nationalists; North Korean probes in 1968; internal conflicts from the Philippines to Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia -- all failures. And despite 300,000 Chinese troops supporting Hanoi, the U.S. military seemed to be winning in Vietnam by 1972. All this -- and the feud with the Soviet Union -- encouraged Beijing's "flip," ushering in forty years of almost total regional peace.

The Vietnam War touches on all this only in passing, just as it earlier all but ignored the critical context of global containment. More attention to the two topics would have significantly shifted the tone of the series, making it much better history, albeit much more ponderous as entertainment.

IRON DETERMINATION TRIUMPHS

The failures of all but the last major move to achieve decisive results were due more to the determination of the other side than to each side's blatant blunders. There were plenty of the latter: Washington's assumption that toppling Diem would aid the war effort; Le Duan's belief the South Vietnamese population would rise up and the ARVN crack during Tet; Westmoreland's claim that he could assess Hanoi's political will -- and Washington's civilian leaders allowing him to try. But the explanation for the relative failure of most major military and political moves was the resilience of both sides at every level, from leaders to soldiers.

There is much to deplore about Johnson's conduct of the war, with his doubts and incrementalism, and about Nixon's cynical lying. But they believed that what they were doing was for the nation's good, and both persisted until their presidencies collapsed, directly or indirectly because of Vietnam. From one perspective, this was a case of blind sacrifice by Americans and Vietnamese both; from another, it's what nations do to survive. If anything, the North Vietnamese leadership was even more stubborn, backing Le Duan in hopeless offensive after offensive, until after ten years he got lucky.

Toughness at the top was more than matched by the pathos and commitment of those who risked their lives in combat on all sides. Nowhere does *The Vietnam War* do better than conveying soldiers' love of their comrades and pride in their missions, including even the ARVN, which held out for almost two weeks in March 1975 at Xuan Loc,

allowing many to evacuate Saigon when the war was already lost.

American accounts of the Vietnam War justifiably tout the heroism of the Vietcong and NVA, fighting as they did against horrific firepower. For example, it records legendary Green Beret "Charging Charley" Beckwith affirming that the enemy combatants were "the finest, most dedicated soldiers I've seen." But *The Vietnam War*'s narratives and interviews underscore that the enemy met its match in their American foe. This is the series' gift to the American people. The fears and skepticism of American soldiers came to the fore, but no less than did those soldiers' refusal to abandon their duty and their comrades. At one point an NVA officer describes how a second American would inevitably try to rescue a downed buddy and then would himself become a casualty. The officer was not so much criticizing questionable acts as conveying his boundless respect for such soldiers. To quote one of the series' favorite subjects, Japanese-American infantry Lieutenant Vincent Okamoto, "How does America produce young men like this?"

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