



## Ken Burns, the Vietnam War, and the purpose of history

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REVIEW ESSAY



## Ken Burns, the Vietnam War, and the purpose of history

### The Vietnam War: A film by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick (2017)

America's involvement in Vietnam began in secrecy. It ended 30 years later in failure, witnessed by the entire world. It was begun in good faith by decent people out of fateful misunderstandings, American over-confidence and Cold War miscalculation. And it was prolonged because it seemed easier to muddle through than to admit that it had been caused by tragic decisions made by five American presidents belonging to both political parties.<sup>1</sup>

This restrained, even exculpatory, judgement comes shortly after the beginning of Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's new documentary, *The Vietnam War*. Clocking in at eighteen hours of air time spread over ten episodes, the film has touched off a national conversation in the USA about the Vietnam War and its legacies. Central to this conversation are these evocative characterizations of American action which writer Geoffrey C. Ward placed in the mouth of the narrator early in the production: 'good faith', 'decent people', 'fateful misunderstandings', 'tragic'. These phrases point to a preoccupation not just with what America did during the war, but what America fundamentally is.<sup>2</sup> On one side of this debate, the USA is pictured as an isolationist and anti-imperialist nation which had been slow and reluctant to rise to the responsibilities of world power in the 1940s and thereafter. In the Cold War and in Vietnam itself, its actions sprung from a marriage of power and principle: using U.S. might to defend innocent, fledgling democracies against Communist aggression. On the opposing side of the debate, the USA was something much darker: it was an imperialist and aggressive nation, or at the very least a criminally irresponsible and misguided one. In this view, there was no other explanation for why the USA was trying to thwart the legitimate nationalist aspirations of the Vietnamese people and repeating the French experience in Indochina. In the words of Guenter Grass, the USA 'lost in Vietnam its right to appeal to morals'.<sup>3</sup>

Burns and Novick have stepped right into the centre of this debate. Burns' films (on which he has frequently collaborated with Novick) have

<sup>1</sup>Déjà Vu', *The Vietnam War*, PBS, 24 September 2017, television.

<sup>2</sup>Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1988), 445.

<sup>3</sup>John Vincour, 'Anti-Americanism in West Germany Appears in Many Guises', *The New York Times*, 5 July 1981, E3.

often served as a touchstone for debate on topics as wide as *Baseball* (1994), *Jazz* (2001), World War II (*The War*, 2007) and *The Civil War* (1990). Those of us who teach about the Vietnam War for a living know that the preconceptions of our students frequently have their origins in a viewing of *The Deer Hunter* or *Apocalypse Now*, and Burns and Novick's contribution to the visual history of the Vietnam War is likely to be a similarly formative moment in public memory. Both before and after the series started airing in September 2017, Burns spoke of his hope that it could even act as a starting point for national reconciliation over the war and its legacies. The Vietnam War, he said, was a 'virus' that had infected Americans with maladies such as disunion, mistrust of government, and lack of civil discourse. His film aimed to be 'some sort of vaccination, a little bit more of the disease to get you immune'.<sup>4</sup> On another occasion Burns said that he hoped the documentary might go 'some distance towards ending the kind of divisions that Vietnam sponsored ... [to] get to a place where our country can feel like it's back to shared stories, and not "us against them"'.<sup>5</sup>

This has not been the result. Although *The Vietnam War* received extremely high praise from television critics in general, many historians, public figures and veterans with a particular interest in the conflict have been less forgiving. This essay analyzes *The Vietnam War* and the debate it has engendered, placing it in the context of recent revisionist scholarship. Ultimately it argues that Burns and Novick's superficial telling of the history of the war fails to get to grips with the deeper ideas and structures of belief that led the USA into the Vietnam debacle in the first place – and which, if not tackled, threaten to lead it down similarly unwise paths in the future.

## Ken Burns and the purpose of history

Burns is probably the most influential historian in the USA, so his approach to his craft matters. Burns' primary interest is in *American* history, and particularly the lived experience of American history for the individuals who were there. This leads him to adopt a bottom-up methodology which privileges 'stories, anecdotes ... people, [and] biography'.<sup>6</sup> This approach was particularly notable in *The Vietnam War*, which focused on interviews with soldiers, anti-war activists and others who experienced the war and its consequences at the grassroots rather than on high-level policymakers and

<sup>4</sup>Holly Ramer, 'Burns Sees Vietnam War as a Virus, Documentary as Vaccination', *Stars and Stripes*, 16 July 2017, <https://www.stripes.com/news/veterans/burns-sees-vietnam-war-as-virus-documentary-as-vaccination-1.478322>.

<sup>5</sup>Quoted in Kristi Turnquist, "'The Vietnam War': Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's Powerful Film is Engrossing, and Appalling', *The Oregonian*, 14 September 2017, [http://www.oregonlive.com/tv/2017/09/the\\_vietnam\\_war\\_ken\\_burns\\_and.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/tv/2017/09/the_vietnam_war_ken_burns_and.html).

<sup>6</sup>David Thelan, 'The Movie Maker as Historian: Conversations with Ken Burns', *The Journal of American History* 81/3 (1994), 1035.

politicians. The directors also took the decision not to feature interviews with historians or other academics in the documentary. Burns has been heavily critical of academic historians for 'murdering our [American] history' and killing the public appetite for consuming works of history. In his view, the murder weapon has been the professionalization of the academy: the tendency of historians to produce 'maddeningly abstruse and stultifyingly specific' work only intended to be read by other specialist historians.<sup>7</sup> He has also accused academic historians of being obsessed with advancing particular interpretations rather than simply opening their ears and listening to the broader chorus of voices in American history, with their diverse and contradictory perspectives. In Burns' conception, the goal of history is to stitch together the many different truths experienced by those affected by an event rather than privileging one particular viewpoint. Reflecting this, the promotional material for *The Vietnam War* stressed the point that '[t]here is no single truth in war'. This recognition that truth is multiple should result in a shared story which tolerates different points of view and serves the primary function of helping the American people come to terms with an event in their history, hence anchoring them securely for the future. 'People without a past are not a people,' Burns has said, adding that 'without that awareness [of history] we have no sense of where we've been in order to know where we're going'.<sup>8</sup>

As seen in *The Vietnam War*, this approach yields mixed results. Burns' desire to tell a shared story so that the American nation can know where it came from and where it is going reflects the old 'consensus tradition' of American historiography. This tradition acknowledged the diverse racial, social and sectional voices in American history, but stressed above all else that a shared liberal ideology of American-ness united these different groups. The consensus tradition tended to focus on cooperation and downplayed the existence of fundamental conflicts between different groups in American society. The American story was, in this telling, one for which the motto could indeed be *e pluribus unum* – out of the many, one.<sup>9</sup> The problem with this approach was that, as Burns has admitted of his own work, it focused much more on the *unum* than the *pluribus* – much more on what united rather than what divided. The result was an exaggerated stress on the shared story of American-ness which downplayed the conflicts over ideology and morality which had in fact animated American history.<sup>10</sup> *The Vietnam War* takes a very similar approach, with the same problem resulting.

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 1032.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>John Higham, 'Beyond Consensus: The Historian as Moral Critic', *The American Historical Review* 67/3 (1962), 615.

<sup>10</sup>Thomas Cripps, 'Historical Truth: An Interview with Ken Burns', *The American History Review* 100/3 (1995), 747. See also Thelan, 'The Movie Maker as Historian', 1047.

The quest for a 'shared story' which can prove instructive for the nation – to 'include the diverse tributaries of our experience into something that might nourish the whole', as Burns has put it – can only be achieved at the cost of leaving unexamined strategic, moral and ideological questions which in fact sharply divided Americans during the war, and continue to divide historians today.<sup>11</sup> The failure of the documentary to address these questions is a severe limitation, not only because the particular answers that policy-makers provided during the Vietnam War led to the deaths of millions, but also because we have a stake in the answers that will be given in the future.

### Why was the USA in Vietnam?

Given that the Vietnam War led to immense suffering and ended in American defeat, the question of why the USA became involved in the first place is an important one. As we have seen, Burns and Novick begin their documentary by framing this issue in a way that minimizes blame for the 'tragic' consequences of the 'fateful misunderstandings' by 'decent people' which led the U.S. into the war. Their focus on the suffering of those experiencing the war and its consequences at the grassroots can sometimes make the conflict seem like an act of God rather than an event brought about by politicians and policymakers, whose actions receive much less attention in the film. Instead, the story of the war is framed as one of shared suffering. To their credit, Burns and Novick also included the voices of Vietnamese veterans, so the story is not told – as it so often has been in the past – as primarily one of *American* suffering. Burns and Novick's 'shared story' of suffering could even plausibly become a basis for reconciliation as participants on both sides realize they were part of the same 'republic of suffering', as one historian has put it when describing a different war.<sup>12</sup> But such a reconciliation could only be superficial because it ignores the question which hovers just above the frame, always out of sight: *why* did this suffering have to be endured? It is a weakness of Burns and Novick's experiential, bottom-up approach that it is unable to grapple with this question.

Scholars have not been so bashful, including in response to Burns and Novick's film. The 'tragedy' interpretation of the origins of the Vietnam War has two main rivals. The first is the 'Noble Cause' school of revisionism, named for a phrase used by then-candidate for president Ronald Reagan to describe the Vietnam War in 1980.<sup>13</sup> Far from seeing the war as a misguided

<sup>11</sup>Cripps, 'Historical Truth', 9.

<sup>12</sup>Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Vintage 2009).

<sup>13</sup>Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War* (Oxford: Blackwell 2009), 14.

'tragedy', this interpretation stresses the moral responsibility of the USA to stop the spread of Communism, a totalitarian form of government which the school contends brings misery to anyone ruled by it. As Norman Podhoretz once framed it, the central point of the 'Noble Cause' school is that the expansion of Communist rule to South Vietnam would have been a greater evil, both morally and strategically, than the war which attempted to stop it.<sup>14</sup> If there is a tragedy according to 'Noble Cause' writers, it is only that the USA failed. The second critique has come from scholars and commentators on the left who feel that the interpretation of the war as a 'tragedy' allows U.S. policymakers to escape blame for decisions they took which led to a war costing millions of lives. At the heart of this debate is the assignation of blame. The 'Noble Cause' school wants blame for the suffering caused by the war to be placed firmly at the feet of the Vietnamese Communist movement. Critics on the left assign blame to the aggressive and imperialistic policies of the USA itself, which had no business attempting to quash the legitimate nationalist demands of the Vietnamese.

Responding to the documentary on behalf of the 'Lost Cause' school, leading revisionist Lewis Sorley blasted it for failing to stress that it was 'aggression by the North Vietnamese Communists' that led to the 'bloodshed and agony' of the war.<sup>15</sup> Phillip Jennings, author of *The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Vietnam War*, accused Burns (he doesn't mention Novick) of positing 'moral equivalency' between the U.S. and the Vietnamese Communist movement. 'Communist North Vietnam invaded a South Vietnam striving for democracy', Jennings writes, and Burns attempts to 'justify the cowardly and morally bankrupt left that supported the communist invasion of South Vietnam and turned its back on the murder, imprisonment, and misery of our former allies'.<sup>16</sup> Illustrating the extent to which the debate over moral responsibility for the war is tied to the question of American identity and patriotism, both Sorley and Jennings go on to accuse their opponents of being anti-American. Sorley claims that 'Burns does not much like America, an outlook which permeates his work', while Jennings alleges that 'the left cannot accept' that 'Americans are better than communists'.<sup>17</sup> These revisionist authors also strongly reject Burns and Novick's hope that their documentary might sooth over disagreement and pave the way to a 'shared story' of the war. Sorley described the idea that the documentary might lead to reconciliation as 'fatuous', adding: 'There is no middle ground, and the Burns film demonstrates ... how deep

<sup>14</sup>Norman Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1982), 195.

<sup>15</sup>Lewis Sorley comments during a panel at the Center for Strategic & International Studies, 29 September 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0HfLCMEkrz8>.

<sup>16</sup>Phillip Jennings, 'Justifying the Betrayal of Vietnam Emerges as the *Raison d'être* of Ken Burns' Film on War', *The New York Sun*, 11 October 2017. See also Phillip Jennings, *The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Vietnam War* (Washington DC: Regnery Publishing 2010).

<sup>17</sup>Lewis Sorley comments, 29 September 2017; Jennings, 'Justifying the Betrayal'.

and unbridgeable the divide remains'.<sup>18</sup> Another leading revisionist, Mark Moyar, alleges that the documentary amounts to a 'partisan harangue that is certain to keep Americans divided'.<sup>19</sup>

Response from the other side of the debate has also been critical. Military historian Andrew Bacevich argues that while it is a truism that war is a 'tragedy', this observation does not get us very far. It can even deflect and excuse. In contrast to the 'Lost Cause' narrative of a noble America riding to the rescue of those threatened by Communism, Bacevich argues that the USA was wrong to involve itself in what was essentially a Vietnamese conflict. Had America instead 'allowed the Vietnamese to settle their own differences ... far, far fewer people would have died'. Ultimately, Bacevich argues, 'the war was begun – and prolonged past all reason – by people who lacked wisdom and, when it was most needed, courage'. Far from being passive actors in a tragedy, American leaders lacked virtue, and they 'screwed up'.<sup>20</sup> Historian Robert Buzzanco goes further, writing that 'Vietnam, to many of us, was a war crime, a ghastly waste of millions of lives brought on not by decent men, but by men of power and wealth who had little interest in democracy or freedom, at home or in Indochina'.<sup>21</sup> By focusing exclusively on the lived experiences of people caught up in the war's consequences, Burns and Novick risk 'naturalizing' the war as something which just happened, almost by chance, rather than being the result of a conscious and questionable set of decisions. A thorough investigation of these decisions might have led to a deeper consideration of the mistaken geopolitical calculations and misplaced belief in the efficacy of hard power that has caused the USA grief in many wars, including Vietnam. As Bacevich argues, the continuing U.S. mission in Afghanistan – now longer than that in Vietnam – makes larger questions such as these 'all the more salient'.<sup>22</sup> Conversely, refusing to investigate these questions limits the documentary's potential as a learning tool for American society. By leaving fundamental myths about the USA and the war untouched, it even risks reinforcing them – with the result being 'little more than a high production value version of Ronald Reagan's noble cause'.<sup>23</sup> Frances FitzGerald has also lamented the documentary's limitations as a learning tool. While she admits that some meaning can be found in the tragic individual stories told in the documentary, she adds that 'one would

<sup>18</sup>Lewis Sorley comments, 29 September 2017.

<sup>19</sup>Mark Moyar, 'Ken Burns's "Vietnam" is Fair to the Troops, but Not the Cause', *The Wall Street Journal*, 6 October 2017.

<sup>20</sup>Andrew J. Bacevich, 'Past All Reason', *The Nation*, 19 September 2017, accessed 10 February 2018, <https://academic.oup.com/dh/article/42/3/380/4953032>.

<sup>21</sup>Robert Buzzanco, 'Don Draper Does Vietnam (a.k.a., Ken Burns Teaches the War in 10 Easy Lessons)', *Diplomatic History* 42/3 (2018), 384.

<sup>22</sup>Bacevich, 'Past All Reason'.

<sup>23</sup>Edward A. Martini, 'The Placebo Effect: Reflection on Ken Burns's and Lynn Novick's *The Vietnam War*', *Diplomatic History* 42/3 (2018), 401.

hope that they are not the only meaning to be drawn from the Vietnam War.<sup>24</sup>

Recent scholarship on the war shows that the debate is far from over in scholarly circles. Over the last 20 years or so, mainstream historical scholarship on the war has become ever more sophisticated, especially through its engagement with Vietnamese language sources. Over the same time period revisionists have become more scholarly in their approach, producing deeply-researched works such as Moyar's *Triumph Forsaken* and Sorley's *A Better War*.<sup>25</sup> In 2017, the revisionist school achieved something of a maturation with the publication of the first general synthesis of revisionist scholarship, *The Vietnam War Reexamined* by Michael J. Kort.<sup>26</sup>

Kort's book is the most forceful statement of the 'Noble Cause' school since Podhoretz's *Why We Were in Vietnam* and Michael Lind's *Vietnam: The Necessary War*.<sup>27</sup> Publishing in 1982, Podhoretz charged that even the original architects of the Vietnam War had 'concede[d] the moral and political arguments to the antiwar forces' and cast himself as a lone voice willing to stand up for the morality of America's attempt to defend South Vietnam against totalitarian Communism. In particular, Podhoretz argued that the conduct of Communists in Indochina since the war ended – a record which included re-education camps, genocide by the Khmer Rouge, and boat people fleeing Vietnam – showed America's conduct in the war to have been 'an act of imprudent idealism whose moral soundness has been overwhelmingly vindicated by the hideous consequences of our defeat'.<sup>28</sup>

Kort's book follows in this tradition. Whereas mainstream scholars stress that the Vietnamese Communists succeeded in positioning themselves as the most legitimate embodiment of Vietnamese nationalism, Kort rejects this. He argues throughout that the 'totalitarian Stalinist' North Vietnamese Communists did not represent 'the only legitimate or viable form of Vietnamese nationalism from the mid-1940s through the mid-1970s'. Kort argues that it was 'organization, propaganda skills, and military prowess' that allowed the Communists to triumph rather than the rightness of their cause, and adds that 'these qualities are hardly a reasonable basis on which to crown one political movement with legitimacy at the expense of rival movements whose agendas may have more closely corresponded to the overall interests and desires of the

<sup>24</sup>Frances FitzGerald, 'The Pity of it All', *The New York Review of Books*, 23 November 2017.

<sup>25</sup>Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006); Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt 1999).

<sup>26</sup>Michael G. Kort, *The Vietnam War Reexamined* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2017).

<sup>27</sup>Norman Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1982); Michael Lind, *Vietnam: The Necessary War* (New York: Free Press 1999).

<sup>28</sup>Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam*, 13, 210.

people of Vietnam'.<sup>29</sup> The Communists 'had no use for democracy in any form' and their August Revolution was a 'coup'. The Viet Minh's goal in the latter was 'not independence', as evidenced by the fact they persecuted non-Communist nationalists (although Kort later allows, contradictorily, that their goal was in fact to ensure that 'independence would result in a Vietminh dictatorship').<sup>30</sup> Faced with such a pernicious adversary, it was legitimate and morally sound for the USA to intervene to protect non-Communist Vietnamese against predation by their Marxist countrymen.

Kort's arguments have severe limitations. The first way is through an unhelpfully simplified and polarized view of the ideology and actions of the Vietnamese Communist movement. Kort stresses that the Vietnamese Communists owed 'their primary loyalty ... to international Marxism-Leninism, an ideology that viewed the nationalism in colonial regions as a means to be used to promote world revolution rather than an end in itself'. Vietnamese Communists were hence not 'authentic nationalists'.<sup>31</sup> Moyar likewise argues that Ho Chi Minh 'firmly adhered to the Leninist principle that Communist nations should subordinate their interests to those of the international Communist movement'.<sup>32</sup> Making the binary even more stark, Kort argues that Vietnamese Communist domestic policy flatly contradicted what he calls 'traditional nationalism'. He cites actions such as land collectivization, the nationalization of the economy, and 'the establishment of a massive secret police apparatus', which he says 'have absolutely nothing to do with traditional nationalism'.<sup>33</sup>

This attempt to establish a binary opposition between nationalists and Communists is unhelpful, as other recent studies have shown. It ignores the fact that political identities can be complex and multiple. A landmark recent work by Tuong Vu demonstrates that far from sacrificing their national interests for the sake of international Communism as their opponents alleged, Vietnamese Communists saw an essential synergy between the two. 'To them,' Vu writes, 'national liberation was important but would mean little if class oppression and exploitation continued'. Independence could only be meaningful if it was accompanied by building socialism at home and developing productive alliances with the Communist world abroad. There did not have to be a contradiction between nationalism and these goals. As Politburo member Pham van Dong put it in 1958, 'to be patriotic is to develop socialism; to develop socialism is to be patriotic'.<sup>34</sup> While their Communism gave them a particular domestic program at home and

<sup>29</sup>Kort, *Vietnam War Reexamined*, 217, 39.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 59, 61.

<sup>31</sup>Kort, *Vietnam War Reexamined*, 56, 64.

<sup>32</sup>Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 9.

<sup>33</sup>Kort, *Vietnam War Reexamined*, 68.

<sup>34</sup>Tuong Vu, *Vietnam's Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2017), 17, 141.

ideological alignment abroad, this scarcely made them any different to – or less nationalist than – America's anti-Communist Cold War allies. Such regimes frequently pursued high modernist development and economic redistribution programs and established police states which targeted those with alternative nationalist visions. One can be starkly critical of Hanoi's ideology and domestic policy, topics which we are learning much more about thanks to work by scholars such as Vu. But to downplay their nationalism to the extent that revisionist scholars do is to do violence to the historical record. In another landmark recent work, Pierre Asselin labels Hanoi's quest to advance international revolution through the means of the national struggle 'patriotic internationalism', and both elements of this formulation are important. The leadership in Hanoi were 'not communists in the classical sense; nor were they mere nationalists, as is often assumed by American historians of the Vietnam War – they were an amalgam of elements'.<sup>35</sup>

A strict Communist/nationalist binary also ignores the personnel changes, tactical moves, and shifting international diplomacy of Hanoi's leadership. As Vu demonstrates, Vietnamese Communists were ideologically committed to the socialist camp and trusted socialist countries over capitalist ones, much as the UK or France was more likely to trust the USA during the Cold War than they were Cuba or the Soviet Union. Yet this no more made Hanoi slavish servants of Moscow and Beijing than London and Paris were of Washington. In fact, the North Vietnamese leadership sought national reunification much more aggressively than the Soviet Union or China wanted, and often in a manner which the two Communist superpowers worried might lead to a wider war which could devastate international Communism. Kort himself notes that at the time of the 1954 Geneva Conference, the Soviet Union and China were in favour of the permanent partition of Vietnam 'to prevent Vietnam from causing another Cold War crisis that these powers did not want'.<sup>36</sup> Diplomacy between these three countries ebbed and flowed for the following two decades. Thanks to pathbreaking work by Vu, Lien-Hang Nguyen and Asselin, we know that the North Vietnamese leadership was frequently bitterly divided on how to balance the quest for reunification with both the socialist development of North Vietnam and relations with their socialist patrons.<sup>37</sup> In 1964, Le Duan consolidated power in Hanoi, displacing Ho, who was viewed as an irredeemable moderate on the question of reunification and too sympathetic to Nikita Khrushchev's views on the need for 'peaceful coexistence' with the

<sup>35</sup>Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2018), 111.

<sup>36</sup>Kort, *Vietnam War Reexamined*, 97.

<sup>37</sup>Lien-Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill NC: University of North Carolina Press 2012); Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press 2013); Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*; Vu, *Vietnam's Communist Revolution*.

West. Against the wishes of the Soviets, Le Duan won the blessing of the Politburo in Hanoi for 'mass combat operations' against South Vietnam and continued to pursue them even as China also turned towards the West and began discouraging him later in the decade.<sup>38</sup> This was not the behaviour of a regime slavishly following the dictates of an international Communist conspiracy, or one subordinating its nationalist goals – of which the foremost was reunification – to anything else.

The relationship that Kort posits between ideology and technique is also problematic. Attempting to delegitimize the Communist movement by claiming it owed its success to technical prowess rather than popular support ignores the link between the two. It was precisely because the Communist movement was viewed as legitimate that it managed to build and sustain its formidable organizational, military and propaganda apparatus in the face of stupendous violence. As we learn more about the home front in North Vietnam, we are reminded that tight social control, lack of political freedoms, and a coercive police state played a role as well.<sup>39</sup> Likewise, aid from China and the Soviet Union was also instrumental to North Vietnamese victory in the war, just as an 'American power source' had been keeping South Vietnam running since the 1950s.<sup>40</sup> But most fundamental of all to the Communist movement's success was its ability to motivate millions to struggle, suffer, and die under its aegis. Historians are more and more aware of the need to also take alternative, non-Communist forms of Vietnamese nationalism seriously – as Christopher Goscha's new history of modern Vietnam does convincingly.<sup>41</sup> There were indeed competing nationalisms in twentieth century Vietnam – one form was just stronger than the rest, a situation for which non-Communist nationalists often had themselves to blame. In South Vietnam, the Communist movement managed to position itself as the protector of the 'interests and desires of the people of Vietnam' (to use Kort's phrase) in large part by protecting them from the predatory regime in Saigon, a dynamic that thoughtful observers have understood since the 1950s. As for the role of fraternal Communist aid, one only has to imagine how useful this aid would have been sat rusting in warehouses or abandoned on the battlefield because the Vietnamese Communists lacked the motivated soldiers and cadres to deploy it in battle.

Even though Burns and Novick's narrative approach is not framed in terms of these debates, it does serve to complicate simplistic revisionist tropes. They make clear that Ho Chi Minh was both a nationalist *and* a Communist, and that the Communists enjoyed widespread popular

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<sup>38</sup> Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, 108, 189–90.

<sup>39</sup> Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*; Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*.

<sup>40</sup> Jeffrey T. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965–1973* (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office 1998), 497.

<sup>41</sup> Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (New York: Basic 2016).

support. Yet by refusing to tackle these issues head-on, the documentary misses an opportunity to dispel fallacious arguments which were both instrumental to the USA getting into the war and are – as Kort’s book shows – still widespread.

### Was the war winnable?

Aside from the righteousness of American involvement in the Vietnam War, the other major concern of revisionist work is the question of whether the war was winnable. Counterfactual revisionists have long argued that the U.S. could have achieved victory if only it had followed a more effective military strategy or made different choices at key junctures, such as in the run-up of the 1963 overthrow of President Diem. Authors writing in this vein tend to argue either that the U.S. should have deployed greater coercion against North Vietnam itself, or that it should have adopted a more sophisticated counterinsurgency strategy in the South.<sup>42</sup> Some writers have even argued that ‘there were *numerous* roads to victory, but ... Washington chose none of them’.<sup>43</sup>

Burns and Novick’s documentary mostly avoids engaging with this controversy. By focusing on the lived experience of participants in the war, they leave little room for dwelling on counterfactual scenarios. This has led the documentary to be criticized by revisionists whose entire narrative of the war is inseparable from such theories. In Moyar’s case, this viewpoint has been intertwined with a criticism of how the documentary portrays American troops. He complains that the veterans’ voices we hear in *The Vietnam War* are ‘somber’, ‘disenchanted’ and haunted by the ‘trauma and futility of battle’, despite the fact that a 1980 Veterans Administration survey showed that 90% of Vietnam combat veterans were glad to have served, and that 69% enjoyed their time there. More importantly, the same survey showed that 92% of veterans agreed with the statement that ‘the trouble in Vietnam was that our troops were asked to fight in a war which our political leaders in Washington would not let them win’.<sup>44</sup> In this narrative, the ‘tragedy’ is not the war itself but that civilian policymakers tied the feet of the military, not letting them travel down one of the available roads to victory. Moyar complains that Burns and Novick do not discuss ‘the bitter disputes in Washington over the use of U.S. ground forces in Laos or North

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<sup>42</sup>Classic works from these perspectives are, respectively, Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York: Presidio 1995); Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore MD: John Hopkins University Press 1998).

<sup>43</sup>C. Dale Walton, *The Myth of Inevitable U.S. Defeat in Vietnam* (London: Frank Cass 2002), 2. See also Michael G. Kort, *The Vietnam War Reexamined* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2017), 27.

<sup>44</sup>Mark Moyar, ‘Ken Burn’s “Vietnam” is Fair to the Troops, but Not the Cause’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 6 October 2017.

Vietnam', or 'revelations from North Vietnamese officials acknowledging that such measures would have thwarted Hanoi's strategy'.<sup>45</sup>

Moyar's critique shows that a line of argument that Jeffrey Kimball long ago called the 'stab-in-the-back legend' remains alive and well.<sup>46</sup> The stab-in-the-back legend displays classic characteristics of what psychologists call in-group/out-group bias, in which every action by an in-group is rationalized and justified whereas every action by an out-group is criticized and seen as inspired by perverse motives. Through this pattern of thought, the 'stab-in-the-back' interpretation externalizes blame for U.S. defeat entirely to civilian policymakers. A virtuous and effective military had its hands tied by villainous civilians who, pandering to base political instincts, betrayed the soldiers (and eventually South Vietnam) by failing to allow them to do what was needed to win.

The problem here is not so much the criticism of civilian strategists – there is plenty of blame to go around for the Vietnam debacle – but the fact that this black and white pattern of thinking precludes any attempt to place their actions in a meaningful historic context. In turn, this prevents any serious consideration of the problems which inevitably arise when democratic governments fight wars of choice. For instance, it is entirely predictable that the political will to pursue such a conflict will atrophy over time as casualties, costs and psychic blows like the Tet Offensive of 1968 mount. It is equally predictable that an illegitimate and unpopular government will not be able to bomb and shoot its way to legitimacy, especially not on the timeline required by that government's democratic ally, which has to always be worrying about the next election.<sup>47</sup> These are not external factors which can be blamed for ruining an otherwise sound strategy, but rather factors that needed to be considered in devising a sound strategy in the first place. It is important to realize this because of the tendency to draw lessons from past conflicts. The black and white thinking of the 'stab-in-the-back' school points to the 'lesson' that civilians ought not place restrictions on the military once the war began. A wider perspective would question whether the war should have been started in the first place.

Burns and Novick's narrative approach prevents them from discussing these wider issues about strategy formation in a democracy, which is a missed opportunity given the continued influence of the stab-in-the-back legend. But it does allow them to do a convincing job of demonstrating the domestic pressures faced by successive presidents, particularly Johnson and Nixon, and the ways in which their domestic governing styles and policy in the war were intertwined. While the stab-in-the-back

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>Jeffrey P. Kimball, 'The Stab-in-the-Back Legend and the Vietnam War', *Armed Forces & Society* 14/3 (1988), 433–58.

<sup>47</sup>M. Chris Mason, 'Nation-Building is an Oxymoron', *Parameters* 46/1 (2016), 67–79.

interpretation avoids any serious discussion of the workings of domestic politics, Burns and Novick's focus – especially their ample coverage of the anti-war movement – serves as an implicit dismissal of this simplified narrative. For instance, viewers can easily see how Nixon's secretive and authoritarian governing style enabled him to take escalatory steps in the war. They can also see how the same style led him to Watergate, which in turn poisoned executive/legislative relations and led to Congress banning the re-introduction of U.S. forces into Indochina after 1973. Stab-in-the-back adherents like one of these things – Nixon's authoritarian governing style and the escalation it enabled – while tending to view Watergate as if it were 'disembodied' and somehow unrelated to the first.<sup>48</sup> In reality, the sort of chicanery which became necessary to continue the war in the face of public opposition only heightened that opposition – another predictable development. More useful on this matter are recent works by Daddis and Kadura which have subtly explored the relationship between domestic politics, developments on the ground in Vietnam, and the options available to both local actors such as Westmoreland and Abrams and to policymakers in Washington.<sup>49</sup>

Burns and Novick's documentary does less to dispel the alternative counterfactual argument, which states that the U.S. could have won if it had adopted a more sophisticated counterinsurgency strategy in the South. This thesis has recently been advanced anew by Max Boot in a biography of Edward Lansdale.<sup>50</sup> Lansdale was an Air Force officer and CIA operative who specialized in covert action in support of allied governments. He is most famous for his involvement in the defeat of the Hukbalahap insurgency and political rise of President Ramon Magsaysay in the Philippines. From there, Lansdale went on to South Vietnam, where he was a confidante of Diem in the mid-1950s. After a stint back state-side, he returned to South Vietnam in 1965, but failed to re-establish his influence and became a marginal figure. Boot argues that we ought to view Lansdale as a unique individual whose strategic insight and talents were tragically ignored when they might have saved the USA from a painful quagmire, and even delivered victory. While acknowledging that the latter may have been impossible, Boot hedges by adding that it is 'no exaggeration to suggest that the whole conflict, the worst military defeat in American history, might have taken a very different

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<sup>48</sup>Kimball, 'Stab-in-the-Back Legend', 442.

<sup>49</sup>Johannes Kadura, *The War after the War: The Struggle for Credibility During America's Exit from Vietnam* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press 2016); Gregory A. Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014); Gregory A. Daddis, *Withdrawal: Reassessing America's Final Years in Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2017).

<sup>50</sup>Max Boot, *The Road not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam* (New York: Liveright 2018).

course – one that was less costly and potentially more successful’ if the counsel of Lansdale, a ‘singular visionary’, had been followed.<sup>51</sup>

Boot claims in his introduction that his book is not intended as ‘a brief for ... Lansdale, nor for ... counterinsurgency and nation building’.<sup>52</sup> If so, it is unfortunate that it serves to reproduce and reinforce many of the myths that have led the USA into failed counterinsurgency and nation-building ventures in the past and may do so again in the future.

The first of these is a misplaced faith in what American ‘can-do-ism’ can accomplish. Lansdale, who never learned to speak any foreign language, had an enthusiastic amateur anthropologist’s love of trivia and ephemera – for instance, he loved to collect folk songs and regale Filipino and Vietnamese peasants with his harmonica. This might have allowed him to ‘break down barriers with sceptical Asians’ (although, tellingly, we almost always only have Lansdale or some other American’s word for it), but it hardly constituted a deep insight into the societies or cultures he was working to change. ‘Lansdalism’, Boot tells us, was based on American principles inscribed in ‘the bedrock of the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights’ and the mantra ‘*[o]vercome good with evil*’. Such platitudes apparently carried the weight of immense wisdom in somewhere like Vietnam, where ‘freedom was an entirely new concept’.<sup>53</sup> Boot’s reproduction of this essentially colonial logic – that the benighted natives can be saved by a white man armed only with pluck, an anthropologist’s notebook, and the ideals of his homeland – reinforces a dangerous belief which has led the USA into one too many foreign misadventures.

To see this, we only need to transpose the characters in Boot’s tale. Imagine we were told that a plucky Vietnamese spy, speaking no English, could land in the USA and bring about a revolution in governance through his innate wisdom and ancestral values (Confucianism, after all, is an entirely new concept in the West). We would consider such a story absurd. That we are asked to accept it when told the other way around, with the American in the role of saviour, can only be due to a radical denying of Vietnamese agency, tradition and history – rendering them a *tabula rasa* upon which America can work its magic.

This leads us to the second myth, one which exaggerates the ability of heroic Lawrence of Arabia type figures to alter the fate of nations. Reproducing an error which has bedevilled many nation-building efforts, Boot consistently fails to give due weight to the agency of the Vietnamese figures with whom Lansdale dealt or the structural factors which shaped their behaviour.<sup>54</sup> Diem’s failure to follow Lansdale’s advice becomes evidence of the former’s obtuseness, rather than

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid., xxxix.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., l.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 12, 11, 13, 200.

<sup>54</sup>An error that the most recent literature on Diem avoids. For instance, see Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the USA, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 2013); Jessica Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the USA, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press 2013).

evidence that the latter may not have known what he was talking about. Upon meeting Diem for the first time, Lansdale handed him 'a memorandum offering the new prime minister suggestions on how to govern'. Diem was a fierce nationalist with his own very definite ideas about how to govern, and what he thought about being handed such a missive by someone who had been in the country of his birth for less than a month is left to the reader's imagination. Lansdale quickly fell out of favour with Diem after trying to persuade him to adopt democratic reforms. 'How different history might have been,' laments Boot, 'if Lansdale or a Lansdale-like figure remained close enough to Diem to exercise a benign influence'.<sup>55</sup> But this ignores Diem's own agency, and the fact he acted as he did due to multiple structural pressures: his own personal history with the Communist movement, his need to maintain the support of the landholding class, and his weak state apparatus.

An exploration of these myths is important not just for a deeper understanding of the Vietnam War – for instance, in exploring how implicitly-held cultural and racial hierarchies worked to deny agency to the Vietnamese and exaggerate the ability of Americans to shape their destiny. These myths are also important because, as Boot's work shows, they remain with us today – and could, if not tackled, be an ingredient in another American foreign policy disaster in the future.

## Conclusion

This essay has outlined two fundamental debates – one moral, one strategic – about America's involvement in the Vietnam War. Both debates are associated with particular (mis)representations of historical facts about the war, be they the relationship between Vietnamese Communism and nationalism or the ability of American advisors to transform local partners. In both cases, Burns and Novick's documentary provides a narrative that complicates revisionist claims. But due to its focus on consensus and experiential exposition, it does not take the opportunity to tackle and destroy the myths and misconceptions about American power and Vietnamese politics which led the USA into the war in the first place. This matters because these myths and misconceptions remain alive and well, not least in revisionist scholarship on the Vietnam War. Given their potential to again lead the USA down morally and strategically questionable paths, they deserve a more thorough critique.

What ultimately can we conclude about Burns and Novick's practice of history? Burns and Novick's narrative method and its focus on a shared story of 'American-ness' can only get us so far in appreciating the meaning and significance of a historical event such as the Vietnam War, one which is so close to us that we still live, breathe and act out its controversies and errors.

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<sup>55</sup>Boot, *Road not Taken*, 209, 287, 297.

The 'national healing' Burns wished for implies not a useful confrontation and interrogation of these controversies and errors, but rather a soothing return to the status quo. This status quo has led the USA to recently repeat in Iraq and Afghanistan many of the same mistakes made in Vietnam and gives us no reason to suspect it will not do so again in the future. A documentary history of the Vietnam War which truly gets to grips with what went wrong in Southeast Asia, including the deeper structures and patterns of thought that made the war possible, will have to await filmmakers with a more critical eye. Such filmmakers would understand that what is past is present, and what happened in Vietnam cannot be usefully separated from the myths and stories we have told about it since. They would focus on *pluribus* as much as *unum*. And they would understand that while it may be true that we need history to tell us who we are and where we are going, a superficial rendition of it presents us with the risk that we will treat only the symptoms of what ails us and not the deeper malady.

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