The Vietnam War was worse than just a tragic miscalculation

Why are Americans always cast as the well-meaning innocents and others as the bad actors?

by Lyle Jeremy Rubin in the January 17, 2018 issue

Marines marching in Danang, March 15, 1965. Photo courtesy of AP via PBS.

Ken Burns and Lynn Novick begin their documentary *The Vietnam War* with a statement of belief. The narrator declares that the war “was begun in good faith, by decent people, out of fateful misunderstandings, American overconfidence, and cold war miscalculations. And it was prolonged because it seemed easier to muddle through than admit that it had been caused by tragic decisions, made by five American presidents, belonging to both political parties.”

But the rest of the film casts doubt on these assertions. Over ten episodes and 18 hours, viewers learn that the war was begun more in bad faith than good, by leaders who often behaved indecently, and that its fatefulness derived more from willful blindness than well-intentioned misunderstanding. Americans may have been overconfident and miscalculating, but they were also calculating and cruel. And if they muddled through, they did so not only tragically but with blood on their hands.

The creators of *The Vietnam War* seem to know that something more haunting lurks behind their narrative, something more damning than a tale of tragic miscalculation. They never have their narrator say so, but the facts they highlight speak for themselves.

Departing from Stanley Karnow's major 1983 PBS documentary on the subject, Burns and Novick's film includes the perspectives of the North Vietnamese and those who served the National Liberation Front. They dwell, maybe more than most Americans are used to hearing, on how peaceful alternatives to escalation were available but ignored. In 1966, for example, one of the architects of cold war containment strategy, George Kennan, recommended a phased withdrawal to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee while offering a stirring rebuke of U.S. policy. Burns and Novick make much of the fact that CBS cut away from the testimony to reruns of *The Real McCoys, The Andy Griffith Show,* and *I Love Lucy*.

In the first episode, the novelist and former marine Karl Marlantes gestures toward a darker truth about the war in which he fought. "We're not the top species on the planet because we're nice," he says. "We're a very aggressive species. It is in us. People talk a lot about how well the military turns kids into killing machines and stuff. I always argue that it's just finishing school." At this point, the viewer is left wondering if Marlantes is blaming the war on the entire human race—a convenient maneuver for anyone interested in avoiding a serious reckoning with American militarism. But four episodes later Marlantes continues:

> What we do with civilization is we learn to inhibit, rope in these aggressive tendencies. And we have to recognize them. I worry about a whole country that doesn't recognize it. . . . Think of how many times we get ourselves in scrapes as a nation because we're always the good guys. Sometimes I think that we if didn't always think we were the good guys, we might actually get in less wars.

This sentiment does not accord well with the consensus histories that Burns has made a living popularizing, histories composed of gentle souls burdened by their blunders and regrets. Marlantes demands that we consider a more uncomfortable possibility about the Vietnam War and U.S. wars thereafter—the possibility that it was but a portion of humanity, Americans, who were chiefly responsible. And responsible because they were Americans.

Offering a contrast to Marlantes is veteran Pentagon adviser Leslie Gelb, a recurring character in the series whose own position on the war is evasive. “The war for us really started when we became the partner—or I would say the victim—of President Diem,” he declares in the inaugural episode. “We were going to help him turn South Vietnam into a democracy,” he proceeds. “That’s what he said he wanted to do, and we believed him.”

Later Gelb doubles down on this apologetic, depicting Ngo Dinh Diem as the master or boss and the U.S. government as the servant or slave. “The tail wags the dog,” he says. But then he shifts the goalposts, saying that the U.S. objective in Vietnam was not democracy but the prevention of the communist takeover of South Vietnam.

The latter admission hews closer to the reality, since any consistent democratic aims were abandoned during the earliest years of the Truman administration. Whereas Franklin Roosevelt had envisioned a postwar world liberated from empire, Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower sought a swift passing of the imperialist baton from the British, French, and Japanese to the Americans. Although men like Gelb continued to justify such a transition in the parlance of democracy and anticommunism, and although many of these men believed what they said, the facts on the ground told a different story.

America’s involvement in Vietnam began with the sponsorship of the undemocratic emperor Bao Dai and proceeded with its embrace of Diem, an authoritarian Catholic, as Bao Dai’s successor. The U.S. secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, a devout Christian, picked Diem for his Catholicism, despite the fact that Diem (and his more formidable and brutal brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu) had little to no legitimacy among the public he was supposedly representing.

Burns and Novick’s film reveals a darker picture of the war than their narrative admits.

The United States backed Diem in 1954 when, as promised, he announced himself president of the newly created Republic of Vietnam in the south, and it backed his rejection of the Geneva Conference's call to hold nationwide elections on the question of reunification. In 1955 it backed Diem in his consolidation of dictatorial power. Even the anticommunist rationale for the war would not hold in the coming decades, as the United States discovered that an explicit alliance with communist China and an implicit one with the communist Khmer Rouge in Cambodia made more sense given the final goal of maintaining its economic and geopolitical supremacy.

It is not a coincidence that Gelb would go on to support a long line of American interventions, up to and including the Iraq War. Gelb confessed in 2009 that his "initial support for the [Iraq War] was symptomatic of unfortunate tendencies within the foreign policy community, namely, the disposition and incentives to support wars to retain political and professional credibility." Gelb's views are also symptomatic of the disposition and incentives to assume righteousness on the part of American foreign policy and, when the consequences of such self-righteousness appear, to explain them as nothing more than innocent, well-meaning mistakes. If we Americans are always the well-meaning innocents, and if others are always the bad actors, there is only so much room for atonement and transformation.

The Vietnam War mentions lost opportunities and hints at contradictions between stated and unstated aims, but on the whole it internalizes the cold war idiom of fighting for democracy and containing communism. The Gulf of Tonkin incident, used by Lyndon Johnson to escalate U.S. military involvement, is discussed at length, but as historian Christian Appy has noted, Johnson's deception about who fired first in a confrontation between North Vietnam's navy and U.S. warships does not lead the filmmakers to conclude that the United States launched an unjust war of aggression. In a similar way, the film gives thorough coverage of the Pentagon Papers, the secret—and damning—government history of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, which were released to the press in 1971 by military analyst Daniel Ellsberg, but it underplays the sheer wickedness implied by their revelations.

Neil Sheehan, who obtained the Pentagon Papers for the *New York Times*, explains that what motivated him to publish them was his discovery that the government was "getting a lot of Americans and a lot of Vietnamese killed for no purpose." Marlantes expresses his anger at learning from the papers that Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara "knew by '65 that the war was unwinnable . . . three years before I got

there.” But the filmmakers do not interview Ellsberg himself, who would have issued a deeper and broader indictment of the war and American foreign policy.

Still, Ellsberg-style indictments peek out of the film’s interstices. Here is the narrator in episode four on the bombing campaign in Laos, a campaign that extended from 1964 to 1973:

> Three million tons of explosives would eventually be dropped on the Laos portion of the trail alone. A million more tons than fell on Germany and Japan during all of World War Two. Some key chokepoints were hit so many times the workers gave them names: the Gate of Death, Fried Flesh Hill, and the Gorge of Lost Souls.
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> To expose enemy traffic, other aircraft dropped chemical defoliants, including Agent Orange, that destroyed thousands of acres of jungle and turned the earth into what one American pilot called “bony lunar dust.”

One cannot attempt to visualize these events and then merely conclude, “What a blunder.” The apocalyptic hell described here did not follow from a misunderstanding. It resulted from a fundamental failure on the part of the American political and media elite, and to a lesser degree the American public, to conceive of the people of Indochina as fully human and to recognize their earth as our earth.

At one point the film praises Lieutenant Colonel Henry Emerson as “courageous, implacable, relentless.” Then it is revealed that this battalion commander promised whiskey to the first man to retrieve the decapitated head of an enemy soldier. One of the men did, and a photograph of him and his trophy is emblazoned across the screen. Strikingly, the head of “the winner”—as the book accompanying the film wryly refers to him—is also cut off, in this case by the cinematographer. The joint dehumanization of the victor and the beheaded victim is instructive.

One of Burns and Novick’s most memorable and frequent interviewees is marine veteran John Musgrave, who recounts his own self-degradation:

> I only killed one human being in Vietnam, and that was the first man I ever killed. I was sick with guilt about killing that guy and thinking that I’ll have to do this for the next 13 months, I’m gonna go crazy. And I saw a marine

> step on a Bouncing Betty mine, and that's when I made my deal with the devil, in that I said, "I will never kill another human being as long as I'm in Vietnam. However, I will waste as many gooks as I can find. I'll wax as many dinks as I can find. I'll smoke as many zips as I can find—but I ain't gonna kill anybody." You know, turn a subject into an object. It's Racism 101.

He goes on to apply the same logic to torture. "I want to make this clear," he says. "We did not torture prisoners. And we did not mutilate them. But to be a prisoner you had to make it to the rear. If an enemy soldier fell into our hands, he was just one sorry fucker." Then, after a long gut-wrenching silence: "I don't know how to explain it that it would make sense."

In February 1968, millions of American households witnessed on TV the horror of North Vietnam's Tet Offensive across South Vietnam, particularly the destruction of the imperial city of Hue, once the aesthetic gem of the nation, where thousands of civilians were slaughtered and 110,000 out of 135,000 residents were rendered homeless. In a famous report, seen as a turning point in public attitudes toward the war, esteemed CBS broadcaster Walter Cronkite announced that he could conceive of no other option for the United States but withdrawal. Yet his turn against the war fell within the comfortable norms of both his time and ours. The Americans, he said, were still an "honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy, and did the best they could."

Subsequent examples of American honor revealed by the film (if not by the filmmakers) include the free fire zones of Operation Speedy Express (1968–69), in which General Julian Ewell loosened the rules of engagement in the Mekong Delta to such an extent that anyone caught outside during night curfew was fair game. So was anyone running during the day. Countless thousands of civilians were killed during this period, and not a single American was ever held to account.

The same pattern of impunity was laid bare in the aftermath of the My Lai massacre and its high-brass cover-up, where U.S. troops murdered 407 villagers in cold blood, raping many women and girls in the process. These war crimes proved far more common than the average American, up to the present, would care to admit. "Just a mile away," the narrator remarks, "another company murdered 97 more villagers."

Sheehan, in a related segment, is quick to point out that what made My Lai shocking was not the scale of the murders but their intimacy. Bombs and artillery, after all, were claiming exponentially more lives daily. “If a cluster of napalm bombs were dropped, the jungle would turn into a sea of fire,” the novelist and North Vietnamese army veteran Bao Ninh observes. “Can you imagine a sea of fire?”

The war sprang not only from miscalculation but from willful blindness.

In the final installment, Stuart Herrington, one of the intelligence professionals who exposed the torture of prisoners by U.S. forces at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and elsewhere, tries to reconcile his convictions about American virtue with his deep anxieties about what he did in Vietnam. “And I remember asking myself,” he says, tearing up, “Was it worth it?” He resumes rhetorically, “Maybe it [was] all a big mistake, you know, what was it all about?” And then the mollifying verdict: “We answered the call, me and probably two and a half million other young Americans who went over there. It was a cause worth the effort, and sometimes things just don’t turn out and the guys in the white hats don’t win but that doesn’t take away from the rectitude of the cause.”

Herrington is evidently a decent and empathetic man. He is probably even a thoughtful one in most aspects of his life. But here, in the final moments of this unfinished reflection, we find the shutting down of thought, the victory of easy belief over uneasy knowledge.

For all its hesitations, *The Vietnam War* marks a step in the right direction in shaping the popular historical imagination of the war. In that respect, it compares favorably to two recent considerations of the war. In *Our Year of War: Two Brothers, Vietnam, and a Nation Divided*, retired general Daniel Bolger offers an affecting account of Chuck Hagel (who later became secretary of defense) and his brother Tom as they fought—and in some ways continue to refight—their shared tour in Vietnam under General Ewell’s brutal command. Chuck emerges as the pragmatic innocent and Tom the antiwar moralist, while Bolger himself never quite takes sides. He paints the protesters of the era as simultaneously smug yet at times noble, and he comes to agree with them on the strategic failures of American foreign policy as a whole, up to and including the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Still, Bolger remains convinced that the war in Vietnam was started for the “right reasons” and never seriously ponders what it would mean if the opposite were the case.

Mark Bowden's *Huế 1968: A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam* takes the reader to a more unsettling place. The United States spread "misery and death throughout Indochina," and it was a devastation steeped in racism and a broader disregard for the lives of others. When General Curtis LeMay, an architect of the firebombing of Tokyo and an inspiration for the character of General Jack D. Ripper in Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*, threatened in 1965 to "bomb [the North Vietnamese] back into the Stone Age" if they failed to submit to American demands, Bowden surmises that "perhaps even a majority of Americans" agreed. The award-winning journalist also goes out of his way to scold the kind of ahistorical and amoral hero worship characteristic of his genre. And yet, even in his admirably critical hands, the exceptionalist virtue of the United States government still somehow survives. If we were racist, we at least did not share "the old colonial ambitions of Europe."

What if Americans were not wearing the white hats in Vietnam? What if we rarely have been since? Buried beneath the regular nods to tragedy and misconception, and the recitation of beliefs that protect us from more bitter truths, Burns and Novick suggest answers to those questions. Their film allows unprecedented space for Americans to imagine a Vietnam War that was not only mistaken but wrong, and not only wrong but reprehensible.

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