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## *Boomers Teach the Grandbabies More Lies Ahead About the Wars on Vietnam*

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They are at it again.

They need to beat their own dead horse to death once more.

The insufferable Ken Burns series is running as a veritable loop on PBS, driving me beyond my usual state of self-righteous fury.

The US rout in Vietnam must be mystified again--to unite a nation reeling from the promise of endless war, the obvious reality of booming color-coded inequality, a flatly failed political system and ruling class, and increasing repression.

And to fashion the possibility that a similar war could become popular in the future--even World War III.

### **Why Vietnam now?**

Perhaps because it is the looming 50th anniversary of the Tet Offensive of January, 1968; that turning point when the quantitative work of the mass of Vietnamese people, leading a peoples' war against yet another invader empire (in order, the French, the Japanese--and the Chinese Kuomintang--the French again, and then the US), and the efforts of the US anti-war movement, came together to prove to the majority of Americans that the war could not be won--and that the nations' leaders had lied about everything important.

The lie of that moment was General Westmoreland's insistence that Vietnam had been cleared of resistance. Then, almost immediately, came Tet.

Now it is Ken Burns' turn on PBS--that not-so-public broadcasting system so dependent on corporate sponsors (like Bank of American, feverishly boosting Burns) who, clearly, paid for his work as well as the massive advertising campaign promoting it.

Is it fair to attack Burns' work before it appears?

Sure. We know most of what is coming. He's published extensively, offered the film to other reviewers, shamelessly declaring that he has something new to say "with fresh eyes."

Here is the high-water mark of his offer:

if, with open minds and open hearts, we can consider this complex event from many perspectives and recognize more than one truth, perhaps we can stop fighting over how the war should be remembered and focus instead on what it can teach us about courage, patriotism, resilience, forgiveness and, ultimately, reconciliation.<sup>1</sup>

Then, the low-water mark: "(Vietnam) It was, the narrator Peter Coyote says, "begun in good faith by decent people out of fateful misunderstandings, American overconfidence and Cold War miscalculations."

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<sup>1</sup> Burns, K., & Novick, L. (2017, May 29). Ken Burns and Lynn Novick: Vietnam's unhealed wounds. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/29/opinion/ken-burns-lynn-novick-vietnam-war.html?mcubz=0& r=0>

Bluntly: that's vapid bullshit.

And he has plenty of lies to toss in to make bullshit salute the flag.

While the film makers insist they really want to portray themselves as neutrals, "letting the viewers make up their own minds," there is no neutrality about what happened in Vietnam.

One core project they have: rebuild witless nationalism, the view that due to an accident of birth and geography we all in one nation have something overarching in common, as with my reader and Bill Gates or, for that matter, Trump, and thus something at odds with all others.

This, of course, was a major factor in sending children of the poor from the US off to kill other children of the poor around the world--a reality that persists today that, for elites, must not be punctured.

Another project: promote the notion that the US invasion of Vietnam took place during a protracted "civil war."

It was not. As we shall see, it was a war of the vast majority of the people in Vietnam, who fought heroically for decades against a series of corrupt puppet regimes installed by various invaders.

Another myth: the Vietnamese (National Liberation Front and "Viet Cong") were communists.

They weren't. They were peasant nationalists as Chalmers Johnson recognized in the late 1960's in his book *Peasant Nationalism*, and Walter Laquer noted in his 1970's, *The Guerrilla Reader*. Certainly, they borrowed Marxist promises of egalitarianism and they took support from the (never-communist) Chinese and the (never-communist) Soviet Union, and assuredly, anti-communism was a significant ideological motivator for troops and politicians, but it too was bullshit.

One more not-so-minor point: The fable of the stab upon Vietnam veteran leading to the "US lost because of a stab in the back" propaganda so prevalent now, leading to the "you must support the troops and thus support the wars" hoopla.

Jerry Lebeck, in his book *The Spitting Image* and elsewhere has repeatedly noted that, "A 1971 survey by Harris Associates conducted for the U.S. Senate reported 94% of the veterans polled saying their reception from their age-group peers was friendly."

Burns will pound that dead horse regardless. Most vets are tired of the hollow "Thanks for your service."

Who did abuse the troops? The US political class from Eisenhower to Kennedy to Johnson to Nixon, who lied to them about their mission.

The Generals and other officers who used them as cannon fodder, an endearment they toss to each other even now.

The Veterans Administration: those vile officials, and doctors, who denied benefits to veterans suffering from Agent Orange for decades.

## **The Relentless Series of Schemes to Re-cast What Happened in Vietnam**

Following the victory of the Vietnamese people over the U.S. empire and its allies on April 29/30, 1975, elites in the U.S., those who operate within the armed weapon and executive committee of the ruling class that is government, moved quickly to

- recapture the economy, wrecked by years of warfare;
- exercise authority over the schools, often up in flames of fire and critique;
- dominate the military, riddled with desertions, refusals, and shot-up, fragged, officers;
- to re-establish the regal US presidency as something other than an object of hate and ridicule,
- retake the culture—to eradicate the Vietnam Syndrome, the memory of the loss as well as the why, who, when, where, and what of the war: especially the Why? The “How’s” are gone too.

In 2012, the Pentagon issued its own history of the Vietnam wars. It is what anyone knowledgeable about the Pentagon, General Westmoreland, and the for-profit media, would predict. It’s deceit.

For example, this official history pretends the Gulf of Tonkin incident, which triggered a congressional vote that gave Lyndon Johnson a carte blanche to pursue the war, happened as was described to congress.

That “incident” didn’t happen as congress was advised, if it happened at all.

Then, the war makers had another hack at it. In the April, 2014, the Pentagon, PBS, and the for-profit press took a three-pronged approach with Rory Kennedy’s “Last Days in Vietnam”, which set up:

- praise for the returned troops and promoted the notion of a home-country stab in the back;
- highlighted the evacuees and the US heroes of the April ‘75 evacuations, and
- focus on the post-war babylift and the Vietnamese babies now grown up.

At the end of the Vietnamese’ victory, Betty Tisdale, a close friend of a then-notorious CIA asset and doctor, Tom Dooley, ran "Operation Babylift," bringing Vietnamese babies to the US, ostensibly because they were in danger. They were not. In fact, the first "baby-lift" plane crashed, killing 138 children. The pilot and a few babies lived. This PR campaign re-enforced the continuing US enmity for Vietnam.

Rory Kennedy is the youngest child of Robert Kennedy. As David Macaray noted in *CounterPunch* in 2011, Kennedy was a "shrieking anti-communist," who originated the plot to kill Fidel Castro.

Robert Kennedy, once Joe McCarthy's pal, aide, and appointee, repeatedly saying he was "fond" of Tail-gunner Joe, was no dove, but an opportunist off-set to Eugene McCarthy's somewhat more honest, if bumbling, campaign in 1968.

This apple didn't fall far from the tree.

In every instance, the terms "class war" and "imperialism" are absent. Class and empire's wars define our times, as they did then.

Vietnam was an imperialist war. Rubber, tin, rice, were all key to any empire's designs (rubber, like oil, moves the military), while the other indicators of imperialist action (regional control, markets, cheap labor) easily come into view if we walk back the cat from Vietnam's current state as a low-wage center. Regional control was vital to the US then, as it is now as seen in the unappeasable American desire to control the South China sea--which could trigger World War III.

Capitalism, early on the birthplace of what we know as racism today, made the war necessary and possible. It was a working-class war with troops of color on the US side using racist terms, "Gook, Slope, Dink, etc." to describe, dehumanize and murder, Vietnamese.

As Nick Turse recently titled his book, the US side was taught to "kill anything that moves." Frequently, they did, as the 1971 Vietnam Veterans Against the War's Winter Soldier investigation in Detroit graphically demonstrated. Much of this is nicely covered in David Zieger's film *Sir, No Sir!* less than an hour long--perfect for classroom use

In contradiction to what Burns will claim "There is no single truth," the Vietnam war was no mistake, not the result of bad political decisions alone, but the logical and requisite working out of the ongoing policies of the American empire.

Like any watershed piece of history, it lay the ground for our current conditions.

Brown and Root Construction, profiteering from connections to Lyndon Johnson, Nixon, and all that followed, became Haliburton: home to the war criminal Dick Cheney, still drawing down billions--untold as it's secret--in Iraq, Afghanistan and black sites world-wide.

As the Vietnam war wound down, Donald Rumsfeld argued for an end to the draft, creating today's reality of a "professional" military, economically drafted but self-defining as volunteering, patriotic, dedicated to the unit, and un-cracked after 14 years of wars lost to guerrillas who belong in the seventh century. The military today is almost completely separated from civilian life: about 1.2% actually serve--a praetorian guard.

The third goal, recapturing the military, is so achieved. The military sucks up more than one-half of the economy, dominates colleges and universities, yet few notice--perhaps because war means work. US mercenaries roam the world in untold numbers while the CIA, initially tasked to be a human and signals intelligence collector now runs its own secret special operations sector, solely in the hands of the (gasp) President, beyond the reach of Congress.

The US entered the war in Vietnam as the greatest creditor nation in the world. As the war ended, the US was the biggest debtor nation.

The first goal, revitalizing an economy that was nearly demolished by 1975 was won, in a perverse sense, by a full-scale government/capitalist attack on the working class.

That began with Nixon's declaration that the 1970 postal strike was an illegal "criminal" act, although a wildcat led by many Vietnam veterans continued in several cities.

The 1970 United Auto Workers strike against General Motors was a sham, as William Serrin described in *The Company and the Union*. Serrin went further: "The Inside Story of the Civilized Relationship that has transformed a natural antagonism into a socially destructive partnership and the GM strike of 1970, the most expensive work stoppage in US history." And at the end of the book, Serrin quotes a UAW member, sold out by the labor tops: "The union and the company, they're more or less business partners."

The unity of labor bosses, top government leaders, and corporate heads was finalized long before this strike, indeed, early in the formative days of the American Federation of Labor, but it grew more and more apparent in an era when every labor head backed the racist, anti-working class war in Vietnam: Labor Imperialism—the bribe Lenin warned about 100 years ago in *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, a payoff to the "home country" to back the empire. It's a move that backfired for exploited workers in the rank and file over time, but few noticed.

In 1972, Richard Nixon's puppeteer, Henry Kissinger, cut a deal with Mao Zedong and China, not only counteracting Chinese support for the Vietnamese, but upending plenty of American Maoists who, in 1969, witnessed the destruction of the largest and most radical student movement in U.S. history, weeks before the biggest outpouring of student activism ever: 1970's mass demonstrations against the illegal bombings of Cambodia and Laos; the murders at Kent State and Jackson state.

### **The Anti-War Movement in the USA**

The Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was, by 1969, the largest radical student movement in the history of the country. Marx, Lenin, Ho, and Mao, were read widely; understood little.

SDS was wrecked by the rich, red-diaper Weathermen, once terrorists who sought to replace a mass class-conscious movement with bombs, now repeating their effort as grant-sucking professors.

The 1969 SDS split meeting, which I attended, was riven with idiot chants of "Mao, Mao, Mao Zedong!" shall we say, contradicted by "Ho Ho Ho Chi Minh!" a nearly unfathomable mess.

The Weathermen, according to one of the few living honest people among them, Mark Rudd, destroyed the SDS mailing list.

The student movement never really revived. But the press, mainstream media and *Truthout* alike, still loves the Weathermen, like Billy Ayers, recently the Chicago "Citizen of the Year" and, in fact, a past pal of Obama's.

In 1975, Americans learned about COINTELPRO, thanks to the heroic break-in at an FBI office in Media, Pennsylvania, an operation kept secret until 2014, and described in the book, "The Burglary," by Betty Medsger. The COINTELPRO revelations, a broad and systematic spy-

agency scheme to attack, disrupt, and assassinate when necessary, radical groups led most of us to grasp the extent of NSA spying long before Edward Snowden stole the next batch of Family Jewels and turned them loose.

### **Schooling in Post-Vietnam America**

As war's end, American schools often were hot-beds of critique and action as students who learned, from the Civil Rights movement and the anti-war movement too, that what they thought and did mattered.

In the early 1980's came, "A Nation at Risk," an unvarnished plan projecting years of effort to regain control of the not-so-public but fully-segregated-by-class-and-race school system by regulating curricula, promoting high stakes exams, and in the future, linking that to merit pay.

Taylorism had existed in schools since the advent of textbooks, and most teachers were always missionaries for capital and empire, but this was a more regulated, national effort.

"A Nation at Risk" was followed by the Bush II era No Child Left Behind Act which extended a militaristic component, and then thrown into hyper-speed by the Obama Administration's "Race to the Top," which drives home merit pay, the next step the abolition of tenure, and drives home the militaristic aims, turning most schools into what a top General demanded in WWI, "human munition factories," and illusion mills where children are sorted by fake science, along the predictable lines of parental income—always promoting obedience to the nation, loyalty (the ethics of slaves), while tamping down expectations for a better future.

Most school workers, who are not professionals as they so often dream, refuse to recognize that the education agenda is a war agenda: class and empire's wars.

Proof?

The largest school-based union, the National Education Association, repeatedly votes in convention assembled to "Not Discuss" the wars as the body may find it unsettling.

### **And the Struggle for Rule in the Economy?**

That was settled by Ronald Reagan's 1980 destruction of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Union who, having helped elected him, foolishly struck, believing a union composed of lots of Vietnam vets, like VP Dennis Riordan, would garner a lot of sympathy. Reagan declared the strike illegal, scabs replaced them (the word "Scab" is out of US lexicon), they never got their jobs back, and the AFL-CIO let them swing in the wind. Solidarity Forever had long ago become every person for him or herself.

From another angle, while finance capital dominated industrial capital since the early 1900's, the relentless needs of imperialism and the falling rate of industrial profits underpinned a massive move to de-industrialize the US. Auto manufacturing, for example, moving first to Mexico, then to China, and now to Vietnam.

The industrial working class evaporated, bit by bit, then a torrent. Surely, they exist, but they have been minimized.

The epitome of the rule of capital came in the Fall of 2008, what John Bellamy Foster's book calls "The Great Financial Crisis."

The upshot: over a weekend, the biggest bankers in the western world gathered to face a complete collapse of the world's economies, the likelihood of riots, bank rushes, even revolutions as capitalism in decay became capitalism in ruins.

They quickly did what no free-marketer would ever do. They demanded government intervention.

They got it. Inside their executive committee (and remember, armed weapon), industrialists and financiers fought it out.

Big Fish ate Little Fish. So long, Bear Stearns. Lehman is lunch.

Jamie Dimon demonstrated his patriotism when a begging treasury secretary, Hank Paulson, arrived asking for J.P. Morgan help. Dimon replied, "Hank, I would do anything for the United States, but not at the expense of J.P Morgan."

Finance capital won to the tune of \$12.9 trillion from the surely-no-longer free market treasury.

Industrial capital, like auto manufacturing, picked up hundreds of billions and officially became the small fries.

But, industrialists did make gains. The Obama administration demanded that the United Auto Workers union make another concession: New hires would make half what senior workers would make and the union would not strike for five years.

The UAW bosses agreed, again, to exchange labor peace for dues income, the last definition of "collective bargaining," while their own pensions remain solid.

In sum, on the economy, elites gathered together, struggled with one another within the confines of the all-on-all war that is capitalism, which runs them--not vice versa--and they then turned on the poor and working people, cut off their legs, got them to spit on the gains their grandparents won in bloody struggle, while the labor leadership collaborated.

To Chalmers Johnson, in his "Nemesis Trilogy," which predicts the end of the US empire through over-reach and economic collapse, fascism came to the US before 2008.

To me, it was finalized with the bailouts; the imperfect but real unity of labor bosses, government, and the corporate world to preserve nationalism and empire. That move cannot be reversed, while wars could be ended.

Add it up:

- Parliamentary institutions debased and made nearly meaningless by the direct rule of the rich who tyrannize the economy and wars.
- Racism built into every aspect of daily life from school segregation to geographical segregation to cruel immigration policies and police violence.



- Incessant calls for the unity of all classes in the “national interest, within a nation whose own government is at war with most of the citizens and the world as well.
- The Patriot Act and the National Defense Authorization Act nullify whatever the Bill of Rights represented.
- The President’s private army (armies), the CIA, conducting war at his whim, killing Americans without trial or warrant.
- Massive constant surveillance: Snowden.
- One dangled spectacle after the next: Bruce Jenner to a boxing match to the Princess’ baby.
- More and more reliance on violence and threats of violence: Ferguson, Michael Brown, Baltimore, etc.
- The unity of corporations, government and labor bosses, “in the national interest,” as witnessed with the bailouts but also with the union leaders support for the wars and their physical presence on CIA front groups like the National Endowment for Democracy, The Meany Center, Education International, and many others.
- Celebrations of misogyny: the Porn industry.
- A culture of mysticism, religion, the ideology of death, trapping US presidents who cannot say, “People make gods, gods do not make people,” as part of a grand strategy to counter religious fanatics. Add, according to Gallup, 42 percent of Americans are creationists.
- Farcical billion dollar elections corrupt whatever hints of democracy may have existed.

Fascism, in brief, emerges in the US, and the world, as a rising and popular movement. The victory of the Vietnamese was one of several turning points.

The eradication of the Vietnam Syndrome began right after the end of the wars, first with stab-in-the back lies about the anti-war movement abusing returned vets.

The next step was Ronald Reagan’s double edged stroke to both wipe out the memory of the death of nearly 300 marines in Lebanon and, simultaneously, destroy a “Communist threat,” the tiny island of Grenada with a population about the same size as Kalamazoo.

A massive force invaded Grenada in October, 1983—bungled a bit, yet won! Medals all around.

A victory for US troops!

On to Gulf War I, Afghanistan, Iraq, IS, and the world!

Then, the Vietnam Wars were eradicated from the US history curriculum. In 25 years of teaching college at all levels, from grad students to freshman, as an emeritus professor and community college adjunct, I have had less than two dozen students arrive with even marginally sophisticated knowledge about Vietnam. Granted, the processes of history itself are now erased too, but the Vietnam war is a gaping hole.

The failures of socialism, little more than capitalism with a benevolent party at the top, restored gross inequalities in various ways in the aftermath of revolutions in Russia, China, Cuba, and Vietnam. This, then, led to a considerable degree to today's ISIS, AQ and the other religious often-educated savages who rejected distorted forms of Marxism, on the one hand, and Western imperialism on the other.

Seventh century Sharia law will not prevail in societies which can escape neither class war nor empire, but they have already done terrible damage.

In what is now popularly called the "Homeland," de-industrialization—that is—imperialism, coupled with financializing, created a consumerist society: the root of two-thirds of the US economy.

I assert this has a psychological impact.

The methods of industrial work, as nearly anyone who worked in a factory, like Fords, knows, creates a sense of solidarity. Everyone recognizes that it takes everyone else to create a product, and one-for-all unity to gain control of the processes of making that product, and the gains that are made from its sale.

A consumerist society pits all versus all: "I wish to sell as dear as possible while you wish to purchase as cheap as can be."

That, I believe, explains in some part why it is there has been so little reasoned resistance in the US since Vietnam.

Inequality, a prime concern of elites, has not created a large, unified, sustained social movement.

Inequality, which had grown since the Vietnam war, boomed from 2000-2013, but especially so after the financial collapse of 2008. It's so bad, the French worry about it for us.

An authoritative recent report says:

From 2009 to 2012, average real income per family grew modestly by 6.0% (Table 1). Most of the gains happened in the last year when average incomes grew by 4.6% from 2011 to 2012. However, the gains were very uneven. Top 1% incomes grew by 31.4% while bottom 99% incomes grew only by 0.4% from 2009 to 2012. Hence, the top 1% captured 95% of the income gains in the first three years of the recovery. From 2009 to 2010, top 1% grew fast and then stagnated from 2010 to 2011. Bottom 99% stagnated both from 2009 to 2010 and from 2010 to 2011. In 2012, top 1% incomes increased sharply by 19.6% while bottom 99% incomes grew only by 1.0%. In sum, top 1% incomes are close to full recovery while bottom 99% incomes have hardly started to recover.<sup>2</sup>

The Pentagon/PBS take on the anniversary of the war was an extension of the efforts to erase the Vietnam Syndrome.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.coursehero.com/file/p62kbef/Top-10-5-8034050-133530-Top-5-161438-Top-5-1-6427240-226405-Top-1-393941-Top-1/>

## **What defeats men with guns? Ideas!**

Those of us who taught, agitated, organized, and fought against the unjust wars on Vietnam saw things change—those of us who lived, largely undamaged. The civil rights movement overcame the most obvious forms of political discrimination. Economic and social discrimination remained powerful.

Without the civil rights movements, its practical, moral, and intellectual contributions, the antiwar movement would have been without a compass—hence the lessons that can be learned from those who are most oppressed, who may have the best understanding of things.

The war ended because of:

- The Vietnamese who fought for decades, making enormous sacrifices.
- The GIs who returned, knowing they had been sent to be cannon fodder, children of the poor ordered, drafted, to fight other children of the poor, on behalf of the rich in their homelands.
- The students who over time learned what imperialism and capitalism are, and who they are in its midst—and importantly, what to do.
- The workers who over time learned what “working class war,” meant, a war at home, and who struck against the war.
- The movements led by people of color, Chicanos, Latinos, Black people, who saw they were hit, as usual, first and worst, and often resisted first and hardest.
- The women’s movement which revealed the problems of male supremacy inside the resistance movements.
- Marxists, from anarchists to all kinds of communists, who taught others exactly what imperialism is, why the war was not a mistake but a logical working out of US foreign policy, and the it was/is the system, capital, itself which must be unmasked, attacked, and transcended.

We witnessed quantity (leaflet after leaflet, teach-in after teach-in, small meetings and mass meetings, march after march, one bigger than the last) turn into quality—a huge change of mind, a massive anti-war movement.

We saw what appeared to be become what it really was: the vast, technologically mighty, nationalist, American empire was defeated by ideas, weapons, and courageous commitment.

We took responsibility for our own education, recognizing that the public education system was designed to serve capital and its empire. Our study groups were typically much better than the vast majority of university or k12 classrooms in part because we knew that our ideas set up our actions: both mattered.

We made serious mistakes. Too many of us failed to keep the close personal ties, built across race, sex, and class lines, that could sustain a movement beyond the end of the war. Too many of us got scared off when we saw others attacked, or for that matter, ourselves beaten. And

far too many of us simply got bought by the empire's bribe, settled into comfortable jobs and lost track of what we once were.

Our mistakes negated a good deal of what we had done and, thus: a world offering youth perpetual war, bad jobs, no jobs, and escalating racism. But that world is met by the potential, again, of a mass, class conscious, integrated activist movement that grasps what capital, the corporate (fascist) state, and empire means, and how direct action in solidarity with workers, students, educators, and troops can win.

Perhaps our worst mistake was to fail to recognize the central roles of capitalism and imperialism as the US empire organized its own decay following the defeat in Vietnam: in consumerism, spectacles, new masks for intensified racism, the rebirth of support for militarism in schools and in the armies, the divide and rule tactical attacks on differing parts of the working class, and the restructuring of sexism in newer, even more exploitative forms.

Nothing in our social context happens outside the bounds of capitalism and imperialism. But many of us sought to make our peace—by not noticing or even attacking those who pointed the finger.

Again, the core issue of our time is the reality of the promise of perpetual war and booming color-coded inequality met by the potential of a mass, activist, integrated class conscious movement. In the absence of that; barbarism. If you seek a barbarized region, look around you—wherever you may be.

### **Author**

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