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Memory and Meaning in the Representations of The American War in Vietnam

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If, as argued by Viet Thanh Nguyen, “all wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory,” who or what shapes that memory determines, to a large extent, the meaning of that war for the present.¹ Indeed, the Vietnam War, waged at different levels of engagement by the United States for almost three decades, remains a battlefield because of the contestation over what is remembered by those who lived through that time. Certainly, as noted by Christian Appy, “the Vietnam War compelled millions of citizens to question the once widely held faith that their country is the greatest force for good in the world, that it always acts to advance democracy and human rights, that it is superior in both its power and its virtue.”² Nonetheless, as memories fade and new representations of the Vietnam War take center stage, that war, once more, reveals how and why it continues to be a “zone of contested meaning” where the “power to control memory is...bound up with the power to control the representations of history.”³

One of the most recent and highly touted representations of the Vietnam War was the 18-hour, 10-episode PBS documentary by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick. In anticipation of the impact of that series on renewed debate and discussion of the war, I decided to offer an intensive two-day seminar through a specially designed classroom program at Wayne State University sponsored by the Society of Active Retirees (SOAR). Although I planned to offer my own reflections on the war as a scholar of United States imperialism and anti-war activist and draft resister, I was particularly interested in their memories and perspectives on the Vietnam War, as mediated by the documentary, especially since all of the students in the SOAR program were older retirees and would have lived through the period. Therefore, I developed a questionnaire that requested basic brief information about age, gender, race/ethnicity, and previous occupation, as well as what their particular situation was between the years 1965-1973, the period of most intense combat in and developing protest against the Vietnam War. In order to get some feedback on their impressions of the documentary and its influence on their own interpretation of the meaning of the war, I included an open-ended question on how much of the series they watched and what proved to be the most compelling and controversial elements for them. Finally, I gave a short quiz that was intended to highlight what I believed were either gaps in the documentary or under-emphasized components. What follows are highlights from the aforementioned questionnaire and quiz measured against my own understanding of the Vietnam War and the flaws in the Burns and Novick documentary.⁴

¹ Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), p. 4.

² Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* (New York: Viking, 2015), xii.

³ Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), p. 187; and Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), pp. 313-14. Also see, Julia Bleakney, *Revisiting Vietnam: Memoirs, Memorials, Museums* (New York: Routledge, 2006), especially for her perspectives on how the war “is continually reconstructed and reimagined in the present” (pp. 2-3) and the “entangled” relationship between history and memory (p. 22).

⁴ For criticisms of the Burns and Novick documentary from the immediate online commentary on the series, see Jeffrey Kimball, “What’s Missing from the Vietnam War Documentary?” *HistoryNewsNetwork*, 9/29/17 <historynewsnetwork.org/article/167046>; and Chuck O’Connell, “Ideology

Before reviewing the material gathered from the students I want to say a quick word about what proved to be both a strength and weakness of the Burns and Novick documentary. Their documentary is primarily a historical collage of memories by those who fought in the war or were engaged at various levels of policy-making. For me and other critics of the series, the inclusion of Vietnamese participants in the war, from those who were members of the NVA (the North Vietnamese Army), the NLF (the National Liberation Front), and the ARVN (the South Vietnamese Army), provided necessary and compelling perspectives. Indeed, combat veterans from all sides articulated moving reflections on their experiences. Especially memorable were those whose earlier literary productions, from the novels of Tim O'Brien (*The Things They Carried*) and Bao Ninh (*The Sorrow of War*) to the memoir and poetry of W. D. Ehrhart, were woven into their testimony in the documentary. Also of note was the story of how Vietnam Vet John Musgrave traversed the psychological distance from soldier to anti-war activist, becoming in the process a member of Vietnam Veterans Against the War. His declaration that "standing up to your government and saying no when it's doing something that you think is not in this nation's best interest – that is the most important job every citizen has."

On the other hand, beyond providing a platform to the authentic voices of those who fought in the Vietnam War, the Burns and Novick documentary slights, if not completely misrepresents, the historical context and material conditions of the war. As documentary scholar Bill Nichols reminds us, "at the heart of documentary is less a *story* and its imaginary world than an *argument* about the historical world" (author's emphasis).⁵ Among the most egregious arguments in the Burns and Novick documentary is their insistence that the Vietnam War was a "civil war," and, even in the face of the ample evidence mounted in the documentary of the duplicity and lies of every administration involved, that the policymakers were motivated by good intentions. The narrative bludgeoning throughout the series on the Vietnam War as a "civil war" reinforced this patently false historical argument for viewers. It also slighted what most critical and Marxist historians have underscored - that the war was one of national liberation.⁶ As one of those historians contends: "The war was never primarily a civil war and after the United States ended its massive support of the South, the collapse of the Saigon government was inevitable....Without a fuller appreciation of the powerful appeal of national liberation, the war's outcome remains a mystery."⁷

as History: A Critical Commentary on Burns and Novick's *The Vietnam War*, *CounterPunch*, 9/21/17 www.counterpunch.org/2017/9/21/ideology-as-history-a-critical-commentary-on-burns-and-novick-the-vietnam-war

⁵ Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 111.

⁶ Appy, *American Reckoning*; Young, *The Vietnam Wars*; George Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam* (New York: Mc-Graw-Hill, 1996); and Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, The United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York: The New Press, 1994).

⁷ Christian Appy Blog www.processhistory.org/appy-vietnam-war. Also, critical to the understanding of the Vietnam War as a war of national liberation is the class struggle waged by the Viet Minh, the North Vietnamese, and NLF to gain support of the peasants. See, in particular, Jonathan Neale, *A People's History of the Vietnam War* (New York: The New Press, 2003), esp. pp. 8-42.

Because both the documentary and prior justification for US involvement in the war stressed how the conflict between North and South Vietnam was a “civil war” and not US imperial intervention dating back to support for French colonialism from 1945-1954 to undermining the Geneva Accords by imposing client governments starting in 1955 that brutally oppressed peasants and proponents of national liberation, the vast majority of students accepted this ideological construction. Since the twenty-six SOAR students who already had watched some or most of the documentary turned in the questionnaire prior to my comments challenging the civil war argument in favor of the war as one of national liberation, there were only two respondents out of the twenty-six who rejected the claim that the Vietnam War was a “civil war.” In fact, I made clear in my lecture on the historical context of the war that the simple-minded and ideologically-driven presentation of the Cold War in the documentary of a US vs USSR struggle neglects the more complicated and imperialist thrust that historian Bruce Cumings, among others, dissects. According to Cumings, “the Cold War consisted of two systems: the containment project, providing security against both the enemy and ally; and the hegemonic project, providing for American leverage over the necessary resources of our industrial rivals.”⁸

On the other hand, a number of students did acknowledge that the material in the documentary on the Truman and Eisenhower commitment to US intervention in Vietnam was new and troubling to them. However, that intervention was subsumed under how the domino theory seemed to dominate the political thinking of the Washington policymakers, overlooking Eisenhower’s linking of falling dominoes in the first use of the metaphor to valuable resources in the region that could be “lost” to the US and its allies, especially the Japanese, if Vietnam were to be outside US hegemony. Burns and Novick consistently disregard the imperial implications of US intervention in Vietnam to deliver a more truncated historical and neutered political argument, perhaps in order not to offend their corporate sponsors, from David Koch to Bank of America.

It might be appropriate at this point to describe in more detail the background of the SOAR students in my seminar and to highlight their situation during the 1965-1973 period of the Vietnam War. There were fifty some students who attended the two-day two-hour seminars at a Wayne State University satellite campus, located in a predominantly white middle class suburb called Farmington Hills. The class was reflective of that white middle class population from there and other more affluent northern suburbs of Detroit. Only one of the fifty or so students had served in Vietnam. He, among half of the students, did not turn in a questionnaire although he did speak eloquently of his time in Vietnam during our classroom discussion. Of those returning the questionnaire, 15 were female and 11 were male. Only one of the women respondents was married to a Vietnam veteran and like thirty-eight percent of her cohorts she was divorced within six months of his return from the war.⁹ The average age of the

⁸ Bruce Cumings, “The Wicked Witch of the West is Dead: Long Live the Wicked Witch of the East,” in Michael J. Hogan, ed., *The End of the Cold War: Its Meaning and Implications* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 88-89. For an excellent analysis of US involvement in Vietnam that looks beyond the East/West conflict, see Gareth Porter, *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

⁹ Edward P. Morgan, *The 60’s Experience: Hard Lessons about Modern America* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1991), p. 128. On the working class orientation of most of those who fought

26 respondents was 75. Only one of the 26 respondents lacked a college degree. At least ten of the students had advanced degrees: six with Masters, one with a Ph.D., one with a law degree, another with a degree in dentistry and one physician, the latter who served as a doctor in the Army reserve.

There was an interesting divide between those who were in college during the mid to late 1960's and early 1970's when student opposition was particularly prevalent and those who had graduated earlier and were raising families or in the beginning phase of a professional career. Among those who were now in their late sixties and early seventies, practically all indicated that they had been opposed to the war. One male made clear that, like so many other citizens, he had turned against the war after the Tet Offensive. However, like all of the other college-age male students of that period, he had a draft deferment. One MBA student from that time applied for conscientious objector status. Of the half dozen or so who were in college during the 1965-1973 period, only one, a sixty-five year old female, was an active anti-war protestor.

The middle class and college-educated composition of my seminar greatly informed the responses to one of the questions on the short quiz I gave. It asked them whether a University in Michigan survey in 1966 on those favoring withdrawal from Vietnam had a larger number of college-educated or 8th grade supporters of withdrawal. Reflective of their class bias, four-fifths of the students choose the college-educated being in the majority when, in fact, the opposite was true.¹⁰ On the other hand, as Penny Lewis argues in her study of the class orientation of anti-war protest: "The movement did not grow within middle-class groups because they were more likely to oppose the war than workers were. That the criticisms of the movement did not penetrate working-class communities was not due to their being pro-war. Nevertheless, it *would* be accurate to argue that the movement in its first years organized its opposition to the war in ways that did not, by and large, speak to working-class concerns" (author's emphasis).¹¹

Two other questions on the quiz concerning opposition to the war inside and outside the military demonstrated not only possible class bias but also failures or gaps in the Burns and Novick documentary. While the Burns and Novick documentary featured someone who emigrated to Canada to avoid the draft, it did not present a single draft resister. Therefore, it wasn't surprising that only two-fifths of the students answered correctly to the question of the number of young men (206,000, including me) who were

in Vietnam, see Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

¹⁰ Cited in Young, *The Vietnam Wars*, p. 203.

¹¹ Penny Lewis, *Hardhats, Hippies, and Hawks: The Vietnam Antiwar Movement as Myth and Memory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), p. 74. For a more extensive study of the antiwar movement, see Mel Small, *Antiwarriors: The Vietnam War and the Battle for America's Hearts and Minds* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2002); and Tom Wells, *The War Within: America's Battle over Vietnam* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1994). For a fine collection of activist voices from the antiwar movement, see Karin Aguilar-San Juan and Frank Joyce, eds., *The People Make the Peace: Lessons from the Vietnam Antiwar Movement* (Charlottesville, VA: Just World Books, 2015). Of the numerous slights and misrepresentations of the antiwar movement in the Burns and Novick documentary, see Jim Sleeper, "Why Ken Burns & Lynn Novick Are Too Hard on Anti-Vietnam War Protestors," *Altnet*, 9/25/17 www.altnet.org/news-amp-politics/ken-burns-and-lynn-novick-don't-understand-anti-vietnam-war-protestors.

reported to federal authorities for draft refusal. Indeed, the number of draft violations, from refusing induction to burning draft cards, was well over half a million.¹² When it came to answering the question about the number of deserters from the US Army during the period between 1968 and 1975, only one-fifth of the students identified the correct number as 93,000.¹³ Again, both their class position and the obfuscation by the documentary of desertion rates, as opposed to more visible dissent in the military, may have been responsible for this response.

A particularly glaring oversight in the documentary on the number of deaths of US soldiers due to “friendly fire” resulted in fewer than half of the respondents identifying the 15-20% who perished as a consequence of either artillery or bomb drops by the US military on its own soldiers.¹⁴ Although the documentary does spend time talking about the close combat that the Vietnamese forces deliberately choose to engage in as a way to prevent possible aerial attacks, there is no development of what this meant to the US ground forces caught in these fire-fights. Indeed, the point raised by numerous scholars concerning how grunts were used as “bait” to draw out Vietnamese assaults is definitely underplayed in the documentary as well as almost erased from the public memory of how lethal the Pentagon was in dealing with its own combat troops in the Vietnam War.¹⁵

Of course, the deaths and wounding of US troops in the Vietnam War pales beside the massive devastation inflicted upon the Vietnamese from millions killed and displaced, thousands of villages destroyed by horrendous bombings, especially in South Vietnam, and long-term consequences as a result of the use of herbicides like Agent Orange. While my students from either prior knowledge or from watching the documentary were vaguely aware of how extensive the death and destruction was, they, nonetheless, were under the misimpression that the vast majority of US citizens during the war were morally repulsed by the accumulation of horrific incidents like the My Lai massacre. In fact, when I asked the question on the quiz about what percentage of the American public was upset by the news stories and pictures of the My Lai massacre, only 1/6th of the respondents accurately choose the highest percentage among the four answers of 65%. In his discussion of the massacre and the response to My Lai and the conviction of Lt. Calley, the only one charged with criminal culpability, Tom Englehardt cites the overwhelming support for Calley.¹⁶ Perhaps, it is still pertinent to raise the questions that

¹² Morgan, *The Sixties Experience*, p. 128; and Neale, *A People's History of the Vietnam War*, 159. On draft resistance to the Vietnam War, see Michael S. Foley, *Confronting the War Machine: Draft Resistance During the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

¹³ Neale, *A People's History of the Vietnam War*, p. 159. On military dissent during the Vietnam War, see David Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt: G.I. Resistance during the Vietnam War* (New York: Anchor Press, 1975); and David L. Parsons, *Dangerous Grounds: Antiwar Coffeehouses and Military Dissent in the Vietnam Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

¹⁴ Neale, *A People's History of the Vietnam War*, p. 87. A particularly poignant journalistic account of the Pentagon's cover-up of friendly fire deaths can be found in C. D. B. Bryan, *Friendly Fire* (New York: Bantam Books, 1977).

¹⁵ See, especially, Appy, *Working-Class War*. Appy estimates that only 20% of the US military in Vietnam ever saw combat.

¹⁶ The *Time* magazine poll is cited by Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), p. 224. The discussion of My Lai, Calley, and war crimes can be found in *ibid.*, pp. 215-27.

John Marciano does in his book, *The American War in Vietnam*: “Can a war be honorable if...it was a violation of international law, a criminal act of aggression? If so, can the warrior be separated from the war, and act with honor in a criminal cause?”¹⁷

In their compulsion to extract some sense of decency and courage in the actions of individual US soldiers in the war in Vietnam, Burns and Novick actually downplay the overall criminality of the prosecution of the war. According to Nick Turse: “The killings of civilians...were widespread, routine, and directly attributable to the US command policies....Face-to-face atrocities were responsible for just a fraction of the millions of civilian casualties in South Vietnam. Matter-of-fact mass killings that dwarfed the slaughter at My Lai normally involved heavier fire power and command policies that allowed it to be unleashed with impunity.”¹⁸ In their rush to end the documentary with the fleeting hopes for therapeutic reconciliation, Burns and Novick bring together individual soldiers, civilians, and even antiwar protestors to the Vietnam Memorial, the moving landmark in Washington D.C. However, as one observer of the Vietnam Memorial notes, “the memorial to the American war dead is 150 yards long; if a similar monument were built with the same density of names of the Vietnamese who died in it, (it) would be nine miles long.”¹⁹

Certainly, the memorializing of the American war in Vietnam, whether in the United States or Vietnam, must contend with the complicated and contradictory connections of memory and history in all the representations of that war.²⁰ My class could only scratch the surface of what the Vietnam War meant then and means now. While the Burns and Novick documentary provided an opportunity for an important intervention into the meaning of the American war in Vietnam, its flaws only underscored the need for a more complete rendering in any and all representations of that war. The fact that their documentary stops very short of drawing lessons for the present only reinforces the sense that there is something fundamentally incomplete and even tendentious about what is, nonetheless, a compelling representation of the war. It therefore seems fitting that I should end this essay with what Christian Appy calls “some of the troubling similarities between the past and the present, none of which is addressed in the film. During the twenty-first century, as in Vietnam a half century ago:

- The United States once again waged undeclared war under false pretexts.
- Once again, hundreds of thousands of American troops were deployed to distant lands where they were widely perceived as hostile invaders.
- Once again, the mission was to prop up foreign governments that could not gain the broad support of their own people.
- Once again, we fought brutal counterinsurgencies guaranteed to maim, kill, or displace countless civilians.

¹⁷ John Marciano, *The American War in Vietnam: Crime or Commemoration?* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016), p. 11.

¹⁸ Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2017), p. 22.

¹⁹ Cited in Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, p. 66.

²⁰ Bleakney, *Revisiting Vietnam*.

- Once again, U.S. officials insisted that victory depended on winning the “hearts and minds” of ordinary people even as our warfare was endangering those very people and driving them into the arms of the enemy.
- Once again, the fighting persisted long after a majority of Americans had deemed it mistaken or even immoral.
- And once again the government failed to achieve its stated objectives and sought face-saving exits to disguise the disasters it had created.”²¹

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²¹ Appy Blog.

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