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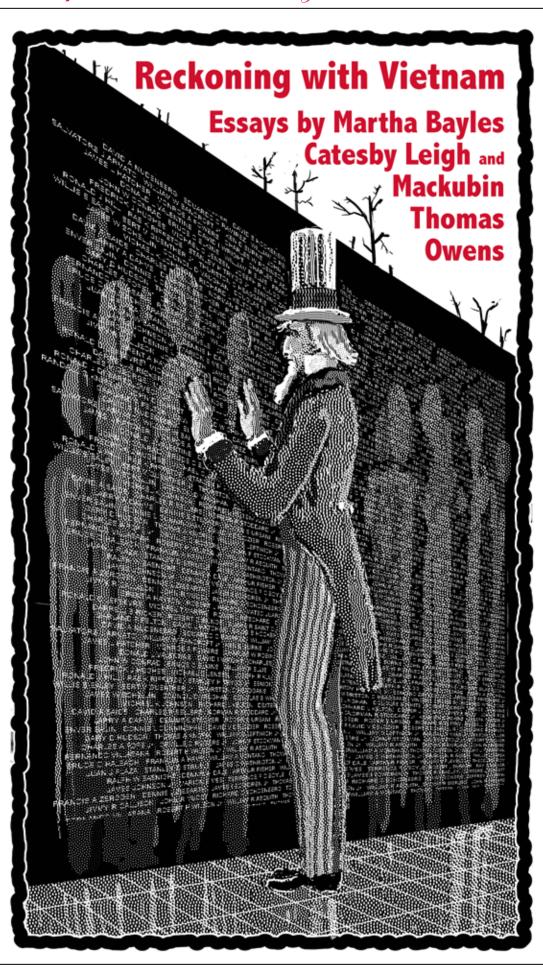
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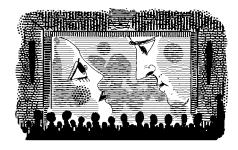
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SHADOW PLAY by Martha Bayles



The Dark at the End of the Tunnel

The war in Vietnam was not lost in the field, nor was it lost on the front pages of the New York Times, or on the college campuses. It was lost in Washington, D.C., even before Americans assumed sole responsibility for the fighting in 1965 and before they realized the country was at war; indeed, even before the first American units were deployed.

HESE FORCEFUL WORDS ARE FROM DEReliction of Duty, the 1997 bestseller by U.S. Army Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster. Re-issued in 2017, when McMaster became President Trump's second national security advisor, the book offers a blow-by-blow, or rather blunder-by-blunder, account of how two successive Democratic administrations led America into a conflagration that lasted 20 years; cost \$139 billion (by official estimate; the true figure is doubtless much larger); and resulted in the deaths of 58,000 American soldiers, 250,000 South Vietnamese soldiers, 5,000 soldiers from U.S.-allied nations, 1.1 million North Vietnamese and Viet Cong fighters, and 2 million civilians.

McMaster's account is strangely satisfying, because while not quite a conspiracy theory, it relieves the mental strain of sorting through the myriad reasons why the Vietnam war turned out so badly. His list of culprits is refreshingly short: neither the warriors fighting the war, nor the media covering it, nor the protesters marching against it, nor even the enemy, come in for much blame. Instead, the waste and tragedy are laid at the feet of two presidents, John F. Kennedy and (especially) Lyndon B. Johnson, and their top military and civilian advisors, whose "failings were many and reinforcing: arrogance, weakness, lying in pursuit of self-interest, and, above all, the abdication of responsibility for the American people."

It is now 43 years since the last American was helicoptered out of Saigon, and McMaster's culprits have departed this life. Does this

mean that we can finally put the passionate intensity of the Vietnam era behind us? On the one hand, gazing into the dark chasm grown from the political and cultural fissures of that era, I am inclined to agree with Phil Gioia, a veteran who served two combat tours between 1968 and 1970: "The Vietnam War drove a stake right into the heart of America...and we've never recovered." Next to the Civil War,

Discussed in this essay:

The Vietnam War, directed by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick. Screenplay by Geoffrey C. Ward. Public Broadcasting Service

the Vietnam war roused more agony, rage, and frustration than anything else in American history. The intensity of those passions may wax and wane, but their residue persists.

On the other hand, after my 18-hour immersion in *The Vietnam War*, the ten-part documentary series that premiered on PBS last September, I am tempted to say yes, some Americans have made their peace with Vietnam. Produced by PBS stalwarts Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, the series was the public network's highest-rated program of 2016-17. During the first broadcast it was streamed more than 8.4 million times, including a Vietnamese-language version that was streamed 620,000 times. Today the DVDs and downloads are selling briskly.

That's all very well, you might say. But the steady decline of the *PBS NewsHour*, plus a good deal of politically tendentious programming made possible by the Corporation for Progressive Broadcasting and Viewers Not Like You, might lead conservative or middle-of-the-road viewers to expect *The Vietnam War* to be a left-wing screed. That is why,

upon receiving the beefy companion book, I turned first to the index, asking: Who got interviewed? Whose perspective got played up or down? How many radical social critics got invited to enlighten the rest of us on how the horrors of Vietnam were an expression of the sickness of America's soul?

The short answer is: none. The grizzled hawks and doves of the war generation are mentioned but not featured, and the same is true of their squabbling progeny. Instead, Burns and Novick spent ten painstaking years blending together a stunning wealth of archival visual material; a crisp narration written by Geoffrey C. Ward (who has collaborated with Burns on several previous series, including *The Civil War*, *Baseball, Jazz*, and *The Roosevelts*) and spoken by the actor Peter Coyote; and most important, the testimonies of 80 men and women who either participated in the hard fighting or were directly affected by it.

Some of these participants are warriors for whom Vietnam became a Dantean inferno: Everett Alvarez, Huy Duc, Roger Harris, Hal Kushner, John Musgrave. Some are soldiers who became poets and fiction writers: Philip Caputo, Bao Ninh, Nguyen Ngoc, Tim O'Brien. Others are military, intelligence, and government officials who struggled to build a viable political system in the South: Bui Diem, Rufus Phillips, Frank Snepp, Tran Ngoc Chau. Still others are family members who lost loved ones: Carol and Jean-Marie Crocker, Duong Van Mai Elliott, Victoria Harrison. And finally, several participants are former enemies: Ho Huu Lan, Le Quan Cong, Nguyen Nguyet Anh, Nguyen Thanh Tung.

Very few of these names will ring a bell, but that is the point. The war as experienced by these people is not red (or blue) meat for today's polarized politics. It is not a political football to be tossed back and forth between the yakking heads on cable TV "news." It is more real than that—more like a live grenade.





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In short, *The Vietnam War* is a masterpiece of documentary filmmaking.

Weight and Velocity

NFELICITOUSLY, THIS MASTERPIECE STARTS with a gimmick: a half-dozen clips of familiar news footage—a helicopter discharging soldiers into a rice paddy, elliptical napalm bombs tumbling down through the clouds, etc.—played backward as if to say: Here we go, folks, we're rewinding into the past! Mercifully, this lasts only a minute or so, and then we are transported to French Indochina, tracing the murky life story of Ho Chi Minh and witnessing the arrival, in 1945, of a quartet of American OSS officers seeking local allies against the occupying Japanese. The Americans promise to support Vietnamese independence after World War II; Ho presents himself as a lover of American-style liberty, not a Soviet-trained Communist. Both break their word.

At that point most viewers will be swept into a forward momentum that gathers weight and velocity by the hour. Some critics have complained of jarring transitions between the intensity of combat on the field of battle and the inanity of life on the home front. But the fact is, those transitions were jarring in reality. In no previous American war had the movement of soldiers in and out of the conflict been so rapid; or the news coverage so unfiltered and grisly; or the return of wounded, exhausted, sometimes traumatized soldiers so marred by indifference, hostility, and (on occasion) protest.

Speaking of protest, other critics have accused the series of taking sides in the bitter conflict that developed between young Americans fighting the war and young Americans opposing it. The Left charges that *The Vietnam War* is a corporate-funded whitewash of an imperialistic genocide, the Right that it is a paean to the 1960s counterculture and the radical New Left. Both sides need to think again.

In particular, conservatives might consider that the very first image of the counterculture to appear in the series—an anonymous pair of stoned hippies dancing in a park—is definitely not flattering. What's more, this image appears right after a sequence showing the funeral of U.S. Army Sergeant Pascal Poolaw, a Kiowa Indian and much-decorated veteran of World War II and Korea, who served in Vietnam along with his three sons. The information that Native Americans were the most decorated ethnic group to serve in Vietnam does not seem calculated to evoke sympathy for hippies, no matter how many headbands and beads they might be wearing.

Nothing manipulates emotion better than music, as every propagandist knows. Does *The Vietnam War* use music in a politically tenden-

tious way? My answer is no. The soundtrack contains three main elements: a dark electronic score by Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross, which evokes multiple fine gradations of fear, suspicion, and aggression; an Asian-influenced instrumental score by Yo-Yo Ma and the Silk Road Ensemble, which lends beauty and gravitas to scenes of horror, heroism, and sorrow; and a brilliantly selected playlist of rock and soul hits from the 1960s, which creates a magnetic field holding the whole thing together.

There is certainly no musical support for the "Days of Rage" rampages that disrupted downtown Chicago in October 1969. The narrator states clearly that these would-be militant actions, organized by the Weathermen faction of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), drew only a couple of hundred people, because most of those who turned up on the first day were scared off by the large number of police. Bill Zimmerman, the series's resident leftist, chalks up the chaos to "infantile fantasies" of violent revolution. The narrator also quotes a passing "Chicago citizen" telling one rioter, "I don't know what your cause is, but you have just set it back a hundred years."

Then there's Jane Fonda, whose two-week visit to North Vietnam in July 1972 included a visit to an enemy anti-aircraft emplacement, where she allowed herself to be photographed wearing an enemy helmet, and ten broadcast appearances on Radio Hanoi, during which she denounced American imperialism and called U.S. bomber crews and POWs war criminals who should be tried and probably executed. "I've always thought the anger directed at Jane Fonda was overblown," writes former Air Force Colonel James Barber, reviewing the series on the website Military. com. But then he continues:

I was wrong. The filmmakers have unearthed some footage of Jane Fonda that will shock anyone who doesn't remember seeing it on the news back in 1972. She's been accused of many things related to that trip to North Vietnam and there's been an extraordinary effort to prove that most of them are untrue. What she *actually* did will now be out there for everyone to see for themselves.

The series has one clear bias: nearly every veteran interviewed turns out to have become openly critical of the war. But here we must tread carefully, because none of their criticisms is ideological, anti-American, or pro-Communist. John Musgrave, who suffered a near fatal chest wound and now helps veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan cope with PTSD, praises John Kerry's 1971 testimony before Congress as "incredible" and "extraordinary," even

though Kerry regaled his listeners with a long list of "day-to-day" atrocities committed by U.S. soldiers, at one point comparing their "ravages" to those of Genghis Khan. But others strongly object. For example, Phil Gioia says,

What I saw in Vietnam was not the soldier that Mr. Kerry or his colleagues were describing.... There was no widespread atrocity. There were a couple of units that went right off the rails and we can talk about that. But they were not out-of-control animals.... I'm still very angry about that.

More than anything, these veterans deplore the same type of high-level chicanery and low-level incompetence that McMaster deplores in his book. We see this in Episode 2's painful account of the Battle of Ap Bac (1963), when to the dismay of their U.S. advisors the Seventh Division of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) got outwitted and decimated by the Viet Cong. We see it again in Episode 8's even more painful account of the Battle of Hamburger Hill (1969), when a combined force of U.S. and ARVN troops spent 11 days assaulting the steep slopes of Dong Ap Bia, a 3,000-foot massif near the Laotian border, only to find the enemy vanished and the sole definition of victory a ten-to-one "kill ratio."

Other victories were more tangible. For example, the series does a brilliant job of recounting the Battle of Ia Drang (1965). Fought in the forbidding landscape of the Central Highlands, where the Americans' only access was by helicopter, the grueling three-day ordeal was the first direct encounter between the U.S. army and North Vietnamese regulars, and one of the bloodiest battles of the war.

In 1992 the Battle of Ia Drang was memorialized in a book, We Were Soldiers Once... and Young, by Lieutenant Colonel Hal Moore, who commanded the First Battalion of the Seventh Cavalry, and United Press reporter Joe Galloway. The book was a bestseller, and in 2002 it was made into a film, We Were Soldiers, starring Mel Gibson. The film is one of the few ever made by Hollywood that supported the Vietnam war, and along with its flag-rippling patriotism and graphic but realistic gore, it depicts Ia Drang as a total victory for the Americans. No doubt this pleased a lot of Americans who agreed with Moore's statement, in his book, that "every damn Hollywood movie got it wrong."

By contrast, *The Vietnam War* does not depict Ia Drang as a total victory. To be sure, it measures the grave losses suffered by the North Vietnamese: in the words of Lo Khac Tam, a North Vietnamese platoon leader in-

terviewed for the series, "Nothing could have prepared us for a battle like that." It also shows Moore's emotional tribute to the "tremendous fighting man" he had the honor of commanding: "He's courageous, he's aggressive, and he's kind." But in a cold-blooded coda, the series quotes a different North Vietnamese commander on the lesson his army learned at Ia Drang: "The way to fight the American was to 'grab him by his belt.' To get so close that his artillery and airpower are useless."

Truth and Propaganda

panion book, Burns and Novick write, "There is no single truth in war." That has a nice ring to it, but surely some truths are more important than others. In the case of the Vietnam war, one important truth is that the Communist victory did not relieve but rather exacerbated the suffering of the Vietnamese people. The producers spend a lot of time detailing the April 1975 exit of American personnel from Saigon. But they show very little of the "Vietnamized" war that had been grinding away for the previous two years.

Even less attention is paid to the war's aftermath. To be fair, the narrator does mention the incarceration of roughly 300,000 South Vietnamese in so-called "re-education camps." But rather than provide a full account of the torture, starvation, disease, and death that occurred there, Burns and Novick run footage from a North Vietnamese propaganda film in which a couple of hundred healthy-looking men are shown taking instruction in a pleasant outdoor classroom. Much as I admire this series, I am troubled by the way it uses North Vietnamese propaganda to illustrate events without labeling it as such, much less noting the contrast between its carefully sanitized images and the raw, unfiltered view of the war found in the archives of American and other Western news outlets.

We must keep things in perspective, however. While making the series Burns and Novick gained access to a fair amount of North Vietnamese propaganda. But that doesn't mean they bought into its message. If they had bought into it, then the Communist government of Vietnam would be pleased with the result—and it's not. As reported by Jeff Stein of Newsweek, "Powerful figures in the Hanoi government are...deeply unhappy with the series, so much so that they ousted officials in the foreign ministry's press operation who helped the filmmakers set up interviews." Quoting a former CIA officer fluent in Vietnamese who assisted with the series, Stein lists the possible reasons for Hanoi's displeasure: "[The film's] description of communist massacres of South Vietnamese civilians in Hue during the 1968 Tet offensive, its first-hand accounts of 'war-weariness, antiwar feelings and corruption in wartime North Vietnam,' and the accounts by Vietnamese of the harsh 'treatment of the people in the South following [Hanoi's] 1975 victory."

Stein also quotes Ben Wilkinson, the current head of the U.S.-founded Fulbright University in Ho Chi Minh City, stating that "the party and the government are really jealously protective of their master narrative of the war." By "master narrative" Wilkinson clearly means propaganda, because, as he adds, the regime has always "glorified the great victory" of the Vietnamese people against "foreign aggression and an invasion from the United States," while suppressing public knowledge of that victory's cost in "death and destruction." Stein adds that when the PBS series was screened for a more general audience in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, its realistic portrayal of the war was "really shocking."

In Washington, too, there are doubtless some powerful figures who are deeply unhappy with *The Vietnam War*. Possible reasons for their displeasure include its description of American G.I.s killing defenseless civilians at My Lai, its first-hand accounts of anti-war sentiments in wartime America, and its reporting of harsh treatment toward African-American soldiers. But the U.S. government has never suppressed public knowledge of these things for the sake of a jealously protected master narrative. And the American people don't want it to, because last I checked, we still dislike propaganda and believe in the First Amendment.

Does America need a master narrative about the Vietnam War? In the introduction to the companion book Burns and Novick also declare, "Each of us can only see the world as we are; we are all prisoners of our own experience." Okay, but this goes to the opposite extreme. If the 80 individuals interviewed for this series are all prisoners of their own experience, then why bother to interview them? What could they possibly say to us? Or to each other?

Perhaps we should remind ourselves that it takes a lot of blather to raise \$30 million. But I do wish Burns wouldn't say things like, "What we try to do in the film is create a space where all of these diverse perspectives could be represented and feel in some ways that they could be safe." Better to let the work speak for itself—and to trust that the cumulative effect of so many vividly told memories is not to blur the history of the war, but to deepen it to the point where the ideologically tendentious voices of both Right and Left become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.

