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SHALOM

Jewish Peace Letter

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From Where I Sit

Us, Them, You, Me

A very old joke --- Stranded on a desert island alone the Jewish survivor builds a small house and few other small buildings. When finally a ship sees his distress signal and sends a boat to save him, he shows them around before leaving.

"This is my house, and this is the synagogue I built to pray in."

"And what is that building over there?" someone asks.

"Oh, that's the OTHER synagogue."

Stefan Merken

I realize that it's human nature to surround oneself with individuals with whom we share a certain similarity of views. When we encounter such people, we band together to make an "us" group and therefore exclude everyone else who doesn't share the same view, making a "them" group. We separate ourselves based on differences in religion, nationality, economics, and especially race.

I sense that lately, this "us" and "them" has become much more pronounced in our society. What can we do about it? First and foremost, we can begin to look for others and extend a friendly hand, an introduction. Find that person who yesterday you would not have stopped to talk to, but today you will attempt to make a friend. It will take some doing to reach out to another.

This polarization has developed by dividing our communities. We put all the poor, usually non-white, people in a section of town where the wealthier and white population rarely visits. Realtors reflect the fears and prejudices of their white clients and exclude non-whites. And on a national scale, immigrants who have escaped poverty and repressive governments are demonized, thus placing a value on the "us" and devaluing the "them."

True Americanism means equality and fairness for all. Inclusion rather than exclusion. Goals worth pursuing, personally and legally. ✡

STEFAN MERKEN is chair of the Jewish Peace Fellowship.

There's no
Us vs. Them
There's Only Us!

Center on Conscience & War

We Won't Kill

Bill Galvin and the Staff of Center on Conscience & War

After a year of refusing to meet with us, finally on June 15, 1987, Selective Service acting director Jerry D. Jennings and other senior leadership from the Selective Service System attended a meeting of the NISBCO[1] (now Center on Conscience & War) Board and Council. The meeting was tense as NISBCO representatives expressed concerns about recent Selective Service regulations that indicated hostility towards conscientious objectors (Cos), such as narrowing the window during which COs would be able to file their claim in the event of a draft, and the Selective Service representatives repeatedly refusing to answer our questions. One point of particular concern raised at that meeting—and one still relevant today—is that Selective Service fails to allow individuals to register as conscientious objectors. This was and still is a problem for some COs who believe that even placing their name on a list to be given to the Department of Defense is cooperation with war.

A couple of months after his meeting with NISBCO, on August 25, 1987, Jerry Jennings' op-ed, "Draft Registration Is Indispensable," was printed in *The New York Times*. In his piece, Mr. Jennings defended his agency, expounded on the necessity of draft registration, and encouraged young men to register. He also mischaracterized the meeting he had with NISBCO and seems to have tried to bury the lede on what it means to be a CO.

Jennings writes, "It is more than curious that in my work with Selective Service I have found little objection to this idea, even among the most active conscientious-objector groups. …I met with a representative group. . .. [W]hile conscientious objectors might refuse to take lives, they do not disagree that, however individualistic our personal morality or mentality, as members of the same society we owe each other something. We need institutions to protect and embody this relationship of mutual debt, on partnership and community, and that the only way to preserve our individual rights is to sometimes stand together as a group.

From our vantage point, the tone of the meeting and the real-life experiences of COs in our dealings with Selective Service were quite different than that, and members of NISBCO made clear their objections to Selective Service Regulations and the continued blind eye the agency was turning to the concerns of the CO community.

When Mr. Jennings' op-ed appeared in the *Times*, alluding to some tacit support of draft registration—and even war—by "the most active conscientious objector groups," it could not go unanswered. Charley Maresca's excellent statement of what COs believed was printed by the *Times* four days later. Charley was Associate Director of NISBCO at the time.

So, for the record, here is what conscientious objectors object to:

We object to killing. We object to killing in the name of capitalism, we object to killing in the name of Communism, and we object to killing in the name of religion. We object to being forced to register for war and killing, and we object to being forced to participate in the preparations for war and killing. We object to killing innocent civilians, and we object to killing soldiers. We object to nuclear weapons, and we object to conventional weapons.

When war comes, many of us will perform peaceful alternative service. Many of us will go to jail rather than compromise deeply held beliefs.

But we will not fight. We will not kill. ✡

THE CENTER ON CONSCIENCE & WAR (CCW), formerly the National Interreligious Service Board for Conscientious Objectors (NISBCO), was founded in 1940. BILL GALVIN is CCW's Counseling Coordinator and the author of the *Draft Counselor's Manual* and the *Guide for COs in the Military*.

1 National Interreligious Service Board for Conscientious Objectors.

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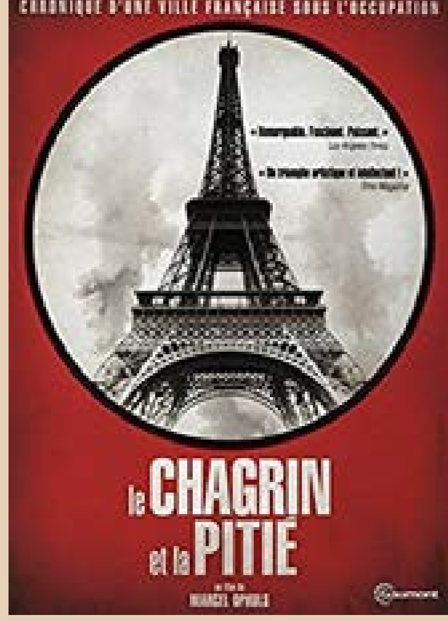
Our Involvement in Vietnam

Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's Sorrow and the Pity

Patrick Henry

Like Marcel Ophüls' *Le Chagrin et la pitié*, Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's *The Vietnam War* deals with both the history and the memory of the events it narrates. Orphüls' four and a half-hour masterpiece came out in 1969, roughly twenty-five years after the end of the German Occupation of France. Composed of some 35 interviews and newsreel footage, *Le Chagrin et la pitié* zeroes in on the collaboration between the Vichy government and Nazi Germany and completely demythologizes the view of the Occupation as one in which a unified French nation systematically resisted the Occupier. In doing so, it unveiled the "civil war" regarding the Occupation still being waged in France at the time of the film's release.

Burns and Novick's *The Vietnam War* appears in 2017, forty-two years after the last American troops left Saigon. Their film is also composed of interviews, about 80, some newsreels, volumes of private films, and dozens of photographs. Like *Le Chagrin et la pitié*, *The Vietnam War* definitively eliminates any positive reading one might ascribe to the events in question and, based on op-ed pieces and letters-to-the-editor in various newspapers and journals, it has triggered off a war of words indicating that we are still experiencing our own endless "civil war" regarding our involvement in Vietnam.



Marcel Ophüls' 1969 documentary Le Chagrin et la pitié (The Sorrow and the Pity) demythologized the view that a unified French nation resisted the Occupier. Similarly, Burns and Novick's The Vietnam War demythologizes any positive reading one might ascribe to the events.

My view of the film may not be immediately evident because the documentary begins with a statement that would suggest something quite different:

"America's involvement in Vietnam began in secrecy. It ended, thirty years later, in failure, witnessed by the entire world. It 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 to admit that it had been caused by tragic decisions, made by five American presidents, belonging to both political parties."

It is nonetheless abundantly clear that the film in its entirety rejects this initial premise regarding the "good faith" of "decent people". Burns has remarked that the committee debated for a week on whether to speak of America's "failure" or "defeat" in Vietnam. They decided on "failure," as we can see, but the whole statement sounds like something a committee might have agreed to, a compromise agreement, in an attempt to project a more positive or softer image of the events to be narrated.

The war of words triggered by Burns and Novick's documentary suggests that we are still experiencing our own endless "civil war" regarding our involvement in Vietnam.

In any event, as I view it, *The Vietnam War* is above all a haunting lamentation evoking the sorrow and the pity born of a brutal, unjustifiable slaughter of huge proportions: 58,000 American troops killed; 250,000 South Vietnamese soldiers and more than one million North Vietnamese soldiers killed; a total of between two and three million Vietnamese lost their lives, so many of them unarmed civilians. We dropped more tonnage on Vietnam than we did in all of WW II, killing tens of thousands of innocent men, women, and children. Our scandalous "victory by body count" resulted in the deaths of thousands of additional civilians. The 20 million gallons of Agent Orange dropped on Vietnam obliterated forests, burned innocent civilians, and scorched the land.

For hours, we watch this endless and unbearable suffering and listen to tales of the rape and murder of civilians by American soldiers who will never be prosecuted for their war crimes. Only a stone would not be overcome with disbelief, shame, sorrow, and pity. Then, we bring home our soldiers, so many of them amputees, drug addicts, broken people, shattered by their experiences, many of whom will never recover. And for what? Our terrible and costly adventure accomplished nothing. We failed to win the war, to end the war, or to establish a peace. We ended by abandoning the South Vietnamese and kept none of the promises we made to them. As Walter Cronkite summed it up: "We finally reached the end of the tunnel and there was no light there."

But *The Vietnam War* is not only a lamentation, it is a ringing indictment of those who waged this war. Our involvement in Vietnam should not be seen as some mistake or accident. It began officially under President Truman in 1950, when he sent the French money and supplies, and continued for 25 years during the next four presidencies. In 1954, without telling Congress and later lying about it, President Eisenhower sent combat planes and supplies to aid French forces. President Kennedy sent weapons, helicopters, 16,000 "advisers," and authorized the use of napalm, all of which he concealed from the public. In 1964, President Johnson secretly increased the number of "advisers" to 24,000, began bombing in North Vietnam and Laos, and in March 1965 put 50,000 ground troops in South Vietnam under General Westmoreland.

Continued next page

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Continued from page 3

The number of American troops would grow to 500,000, and under President Nixon, the war would expand into Cambodia without the president even telling Congress.

JFK, LBJ, and Nixon all lied to the public about what they were doing in Vietnam and how the war was progressing. They were consistently devious and evasive when questioned about the war and all three mention that they had to continue the war in order to get re-elected. This cynicism is particularly hard-hitting since we are told that, as early as mid-1965, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara had urged LBJ to stop the bombing and seek peace. He no longer believed that we could win the war and knew that the South Vietnamese could never win it without us. Two years later, when McNamara continued to urge LBJ to stop the bombing and seek peace talks, LBJ made him the head of the World Bank and named Clark Clifford his new Secretary of Defense. No wonder so many soldiers felt betrayed by a government that knowingly sent them into a war it did not

> *"A lamentation, an indictment, The Vietnam War is also a warning or a series of warnings."*

Walter Cronkite on the set of CBS News on June 1, 1975. When Saigon fell during that year, Cronkite said on the air, "We finally reached the end of the tunnel and there was no light there." Photo credit: CBS News.

think they could win. As early as 1963, two years before we officially had ground troops in Vietnam, JFK had told an aide: "We don't have a prayer of staying in Vietnam. These people hate us. But I can't give up a piece of territory like that to the Communists and have the people re-elect me."

A lamentation, an indictment, *The Vietnam War* is also a warning or a series of warnings. The film actually teaches us the lessons we should have learned from our involvement in Vietnam but did not. We cannot watch this film in 2017 without realizing that we have been doing the same things in Iraq and Afghanistan: the initial deceptions and lies by those in power about Iraq, sending American troops into wars we cannot win, a continual reluctance to withdraw our forces completely, which has consistently led to the addition of more troops in both countries and a Pentagon today that will no longer even reveal the number of troops in Iraq or Syria. But, more generally, the film asks us to stifle our arrogance, question our motives and, perhaps above all, rethink our blind belief in American exceptionalism.

By interviewing at length North Vietnamese soldiers and civilians, *The Vietnam War* humanizes the "enemies." We see the war through their eyes; we hear their concerns about their fellow soldiers, their spouses, their families, and their country. By the end of the film, the North Vietnamese are no longer the "gooks" and the "dinks" we have heard about earlier, they are thoughtful and sensitive human beings just like ourselves. This highlights the deep anti-war element of Burns and Novick's brilliant documentary, as does its insightful depiction of how killing irrevocably wounds the killer, which emerges most strikingly in the account of James Gillam. Gillam strangled a North Vietnamese soldier to death in a dark tunnel. After relating the killing, Gillam notes: "The other casualty was the civilized version of me." Finally, by its intimate portraits of so many soldiers, all depicting the heavy burdens they bore, *The Vietnam War* suggests how urgent it is that we reach out with great compassion to our returning veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan who are committing suicide in record numbers. ✡

PATRICK HENRY is Cushing Eells Emeritus Professor of Philosophy and Literature at Whitman College. He is the author of We Only Know Men: The Rescue of Jews in France during the Holocaust *(2007) and the editor of* Jewish Resistance Against the Nazis *(2014).*

This is the first of two articles on *The Vietnam War*. Our February, 2018 issue will include "What the Burns and Novick Film Completely Missed: The Interfaith Anti-War Movement."

Pillars of Judaism

Two People I'm Proud to Have Known

Naomi Goodman

Murray Polner

My wife, Louise, says we can only hope to grasp glimpses of another's life, especially their hidden, private inner life. Naomi Goodman, my friend and colleague, died at age eighty-five in 2005 and I delivered a eulogy at her memorial service. Louise, I think was right about Naomi, whose public life was well known in feminist and antiwar, anti-draft circles; but little was known about her innermost feelings until her poetry, about which I knew nothing, was published soon after she died.

I first met her during the Vietnam years when she was serving with the National Council to Repeal the Draft, a coalition of left and right groups trying to end conscription, which only whetted the appetite of our war-makers. I stopped by to ask her about some young men—really, boys—I was draft counseling. We then went to a nearby luncheonette and I told her that I'd been a pacifist since the day I was honorably discharged from the army. I had nothing against the army or my fellow soldiers, only the psychopaths in Washington and elsewhere who loved war so long as they and their kids never served. I also told her I was looking for a Jewish group which closely reflected my views and which counseled Jews and non-Jews alike. I learned she was "an active pacifist and feminist historian," as someone described her to me, and that she was involved with the Jewish Peace Fellowship (JPF), a group founded in 1941 to defend the interests and rights of Jewish Conscientious Objectors who had been condemned by most American Jewish organizations and often abandoned by their families. The JPF was committed to active nonviolence, drawing on the Torah and the Talmud and Jewish ideals and experience which offered inspiration for a nonviolent way of life. Among its founders and early supporting members were Martin Buber and Rabbis Judah Magnes, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Abraham Cronbach, Isidor Hoffman, and Leo Baeck, Berlin's last rabbi before the cattle cars arrived

For many years, Naomi Goodman was president of the Jewish Peace Fellowship, often carrying its banner in marches.

For many years Naomi was the JPF's president, where she favored a two-state solution for the interminable, intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict. She and I were invited to Brandeis University and schools and synagogues and churches to present our views. We co-edited two books, *The Challenge of Shalom: The Jewish Tradition of Peace and Justice* and *Nonviolent Activist: The Heart & Mind of Edward Feder*. She and JPF member Henry Schwarzschild worked against the death penalty, and she always fought for political and peaceful solutions. During President Ronald Reagan's undeclared war in Central America, when the former actor was calling Central American murderers "freedom fighters," she would only buy coffee made from beans grown in Nicaragua. More importantly, her friends came in all skin colors. Outwardly quiet and unassuming, she was never intimidated and insisted that, while American Jews need to maintain their ties with Israel, the plight of Palestinians could not be dismissed.

My wife and I and hundreds of thousands of others marched with her in demonstrations and parades protesting our many wars, Naomi always proudly carrying JPF's banner. Elsewhere, she stood for "Pacifism, not Passivism—Feminism, Not Pseudo-Machismo." She also took time to celebrate the memory of Jeanette Rankin, the sadly forgotten pacifist Republican congresswoman from Montana, who, together with fifty-six members of Congress, opposed entry into the First World War, and later stood alone against war with Japan. Percival, Naomi's loving husband, was an eminent architect of synagogues and community centers across the US, the designer of New York's Jewish Museum, and a pioneering and daring urban planner who, with his polymath brother Paul, addressed the ecological and human needs of ordinary women and men in their book, *Communitas*. Yet I also remember her telling me that in all the years of meetings and parties and engagements with the prominent, primarily male, intellectuals she interacted with, no one ever asked for her opinion. But of course she had plenty of opinions.

As a member of the Institute for Research in History she published *Images of Women in Judaism: Male Control of Women's Reproductive Functions as Documented in the Old Testament*, in which she argued that Hebrew Scriptures considered the main function of women to be producing children. (Naomi had a son and daughter.) Women, however, were powerless, since the males developed such controls to fortify their male-only religious system.

In her friend Taylor Stoehr's preface to Naomi's slim volume, *On Borrowed Times: Poems of Two Centuries* (Fithian Press, Copyright © 2005 by Naomi Goodman), he wrote that superficially her poetry seemed obsessed with death and despair and the wrench of loss and subsequent loneliness. But, Stoehr shrewdly added, "Naomi has not spent her life brooding." Peace, freedom for political prisoners, racial justice, women's rights, biblical scholarship, he continued, remind us of "the courage necessary to affirm life and humanity in a world full of suffering and death."

Two of Naomi's poems illustrate her rich life. "A Saint Sat in Our Living Room" recalls a visit by Thích Nhất Hanh, self-exiled leader of Vietnam's pacifist Buddhists, to her West 77th Street apartment in Manhattan:

Squirming on the foam-cushioned,
comfort-angled chair,
He said: You have many things of beauty
He spoke without envy
He spoke without judgment
And left me with guilt.
Guilt for the curve of the tropical palm leaf
Growing greenly in the artificial heat.
Guilt for the life, the extras, the leisure
That permitted the creation of art objects
Amid the improbable plants
Sixteen stories above the dirty street
I was embarrassed for our ease.

And in "Women Must Live Longer" she wrote:
To have equal time
Since they have so much more to do;
Years of bearing,
Years of caring for the children
(Birth is not an equal opportunity employer),
And for the others: Fathers, sisters, brothers, friends,
Husbands, nieces, nephews, cousins;
They haven't spent time in dailyness,
Drowning in the details
Of others' lives,
Mothers have to live longer
To have the same time men have
For themselves.
So….
"Choose Life
So that you and your children
Will live."

Continued next page

Continued from page 5

Henry Schwarzschild

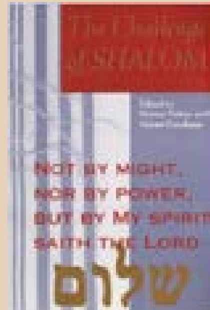
I knew Henry well. He reminded me that "Jews are defined by neither doctrine nor credo but by task. That task is to redeem the world through justice, here and now, in our own city, our own state, our own country, not because our well-being depends on it, but because Judaism does."

He was born in Wiesbaden, Germany, taken to Berlin by his parents after Kristallnacht because they thought it was safer, and then they reached the US in 1939, when he was fourteen. He organized the ACLU's program for amnesty for Vietnam War refuseniks. A razor-sharp polemicist, he berated the hypocrisy of a Congress and White House eager to absolve the men who led us into an unnecessary war but would not extend the same generosity to those who refused to serve. Before a Congressional committee he ridiculed the politicians whose sons never wore a military uniform but opposed amnesty for those who refused to fight. Who really broke the law?, he would ask anyone and everyone, prominent and obscure. "Amnesty," he said, "would be a noble act. We have not had many noble acts from our government in a long time."

Henry Schwarzschild said he opposed the death penalty because after Auschwitz and Hiroshima, he was against granting governments the license to execute their citizens.

He despised the death penalty. I once asked him how he found the strength to visit and fight for doomed men on death rows. He had heard this question asked many times. Someone had to do it, he answered. In New Hampshire during a presidential primary campaign he told me that Bill Clinton, then the Arkansas governor, had left New Hampshire to authorize the execution of an inmate with an IQ of sixty-eight. Henry encountered Clinton at a tree-planting/political ceremony while another execution in Arkansas was pending. Henry approached Clinton and said, "You won't remember the tree, but you'll remember the people you executed." Henry said he didn't oppose the death penalty because he liked alleged murderers but because, after Auschwitz and Hiroshima, he was against granting governments the license to execute their citizens. In 1961 he was arrested for taking part in an early Freedom Ride (his wife was a Southerner), and returned South regularly and formed a group of pro bono lawyers to defend blacks and whites arrested and imprisoned for daring to demand the right to vote and protest. He never gave up. ✡

MURRAYPOLNER is SHALOM's co-editor.



The Challenge of Shalom: The Jewish Tradition of Peace and Justice
Edited by Murray Polner and Naomi Goodman

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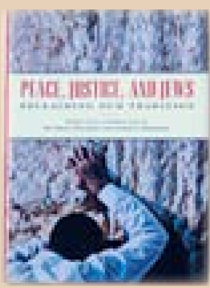

Peace, Justice, and Jews:
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Edited by Murray Polner and Stefan Merken.

A landmark collection of contemporary progressive Jewish thought written by activists from Israel, the US and the UK.

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Publishers Weekly concluded: "There is much to learn here for anyone, Jew or Gentile, interested in global issues of peace and justice."

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The Antiwar Movement

Vietnam in the Rearview Mirror: Why Victory Was an Illusion

John Prados

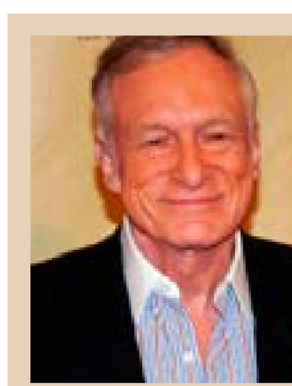
Hugh Heffner passed away last week. Last week also saw the broadcast of the final episode of the Ken Burns and Lynn Novick mammoth documentary film *The Vietnam War*. As the auteur of *Playboy*, Heffner exerted enormous influence on the American—perhaps even international—social and cultural psyche. That influence is something auteurs Burns and Novick probably aspire to. But *The Vietnam War* won't get them there. The filmmakers' steady refusal to make anything out of their story elements, and their latter-day hinted-at but never explicitly stated "honor the troops" undertone, make this documentary a platform for the neo-orthodox culture war players who want to win a war in the judgment of history that the nation experienced as a defeat in fact. Looking at Vietnam in the rearview mirror—which Burns and Novick failed to do—reveals why the neo-orthodox who pine for the lost victory are simply misguided.

First off, getting into the Vietnam War wasn't simply a matter of matter of smart officials making reasonable choices in the face of a Cold War crisis. Approaching Vietnam was a matter of passing *many* thresholds, each one of them also an opportunity to avoid war. American presidents involved the nation in the conflict primarily to pursue Cold War aims, but without understanding the Vietnamese revolution. They did this in the face of an American tradition of anti-colonialism, and specifically in an era when waves of decolonization were sweeping across the globe. The best and brightest national security team simply assumed they knew better. But it was the United States vainly trying to withstand the floodtide of history, not the Viet Minh or our later North Vietnamese adversaries.

> "What mattered? What did not? We never knew. We still don't know today."

Next is the matter of strategy. A winning strategy had to employ what was actually there, what resources our South Vietnamese ally possessed, hampered by the political manipulations, military coups, and institutional frailties of the Saigon government. The strategy needed to utilize the military and intelligence forces and methods of the time—and since Washington had trouble defining the problem, that meant a process of triangulation had to occur to improve focus, then match resources to the challenge. That automatically inserted a temporal dimension. Time was required to focus better, to derive a solution, to activate the forces necessary to strive for victory. But rising political opposition *limited* time. The moment was foreseeable when internal domestic dissent would necessitate a retraction of effort. Moreover, the triangulation that had to be made between problem and strategy had to occur against an *evolving* threat. Hanoi had a say, too.

Plus, both the definition of threat and the winning strategy had to be found within the confines of an apparatus *that was generating false information*. All the data was subjective. The number of miles of cleared roads, percentage of villages loyal to Saigon (what *was* "loyalty," by the way, and how do you measure it?), strength of the Liberation Front's infrastructure, the thousands of men under arms, variations in the enemy's projected "order of battle," the body count, tons of bombs dropped. What mattered? What did not? We never knew. We still don't know today. Victory was an illusion.


Hugh Heffner

The antiwar movement was not just a hodgepodge of people scared for their own skins. To be sure, here were young men motivated by facing the draft, but the *basis* for the war came up short. There was no real declaration of war, official arguments sounded hollow, our South Vietnamese allies openly corrupt—all factors further complicated by the subjective data. Both government lying and security crackdowns contributed, *making* the war reach into the lives of ordinary Americans. Those tactics were another deliberate choice, and did not come from random selection.

Speaking of tactics, the military's standard procedures were hardly calculated to win hearts and minds—the asserted purpose of our strategy. "Search and Destroy" burned villages and made refugees of peasants. "Body Count" made civilians (peasants) targets to add to the supposed index of success. "Free Fire Zones" put the meaning into phrases like "kill anything that moves." Then there was "Harassment and Interdiction"—randomized destruction on the off chance it might affect some enemy purpose. And don't forget the bombing. Three times as many bombs were loosed over South Vietnam as over the north. "Hamlet evaluation" was undertaken by a South Vietnamese village hierarchy—an hierarchy within which half the people's jobs were on the line depending on what they reported. In addition, Americans fiddled with Hamlet evaluation after Tet to remove the socio-economic elements in order to further emphasize security indicators. All that is before you get to "Phoenix," a deliberate war against the adversary's political (read "civilian") apparat, run subjectively like everything else, with the potential to strike down anyone—your neighbor, your debtor, your critic. Successive directives issued to improve legal modalities in the Phoenix system had little apparent impact.

When the North Vietnamese and Liberation Front suffered major losses in the successive waves of the Tet Offensive, they withdrew into base areas where the United States could hardly touch them. When Washington was forced to begin withdrawing from South Vietnam, the enemy could bide its time until the right moment. The adversary shifted to conventional force tactics just as the Americans perfected pacification. Now facing a powerful antiwar opposition, the Nixon administration's efforts to escalate the war by striking into Cambodia and Laos inevitably generated further restrictions on Washington's use of force. Hanoi failed when it attempted to try for a decision in 1972, but the blunting of the Easter Offensive by U.S. airpower backing the South Vietnamese army made it considerably less than the success claimed in Saigon. Portions of the southern state were lopped off, never to be regained. The consequences for the South Vietnamese economy of the departure of half a million American GIs could not be avoided, and oil price hikes after 1972 eroded another slice of Saigon's economic potential. The war ended in 1975 with the North Vietnamese marching into Saigon, not the other way around. Neo-orthodox commentators routinely distort or deny various parts of this story. Victory is an illusion. ✡

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The Vietnam Peace Movement

Ken Burns' Powerful Antiwar Film on Vietnam Ignores the Power of the Antiwar Movement

Robert Levering

Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's PBS series, *The Vietnam War*, deserves an Oscar for its depiction of the gore of war and the criminality of the war-makers. But it also deserves to be criticized for its portrayal of the antiwar movement.

Millions of us joined the struggle against the war. I worked for years as an organizer for major national demonstrations and many smaller ones. Any semblance between the peace movement I experienced and the one depicted by the Burns/Novick series is purely coincidental.

Two of my fellow activists, Ron Young and Steve Ladd, had similar reactions to the series. Historian Maurice Isserman says the film is "both antiwar

Anti-War March, Chicago 1968.

Photo By David Wilson / Wikimedia.org

and anti-antiwar movement." Another historian, Jerry Lembcke, says the filmmakers use the technique of "false balancing" to perpetuate myths about the antiwar movement.

These criticisms are valid. But for today's resisters, the PBS series misses the most relevant story of the Vietnam era: How the antiwar movement played a critical role in limiting and ultimately helping to end the war.

You would never guess from this series that as many Americans took to the streets to protest the war on one day (October 15, 1969) as served in Vietnam during the 10 years of the war (about 2 million for both). Nor would you realize that the peace movement was, in the words of respected historian Charles DeBenedetti, "the largest domestic opposition to a warring government in the history of modern industrial society."

Instead of celebrating the war's resistance, Burns, Novick, and series writer Geoffrey C. Ward consistently minimize, caricature, and distort what was by far the largest nonviolent movement in American history.

You would never guess from this series that the anti-Vietnam war movement was "the largest domestic opposition to a warring government in the history of modern industrial society."

Antiwar vets are the only participants of the peace movement that Burns and Novick relate to with any sympathy or depth. John Musgrave, a former Marine who joined the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, describes his transformation. We also hear antiwar vet John Kerry's moving testimony before Congress: "How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?" And we see and hear from war veterans who threw back their medals at the Capitol steps. The filmmakers would have done well, however, to describe the extent of that GI resistance movement, such as the 300-plus underground newspapers and dozens of GI coffeehouses.

So, it's disconcerting that the filmmakers did not interview even one draft resister. Had they done so, we could hear why tens of thousands of young men risked up to five years in prison rather than fight in Vietnam. The filmmakers would not have had difficulty finding any as there were at least 200,000 draft resisters. Another 480,000 applied for conscientious objector status during the war. In fact, more men were granted CO status in 1971 than were drafted that year.

Even worse, *The Vietnam War* fails to tell the story of the organized movement of draft resisters that grew to such proportions that the draft itself became virtually unworkable and that was a major factor why Nixon ended the draft. In *Jailed for Peace: The History of American Draft Law Violators, 1658-1985* (published by Praeger in 1987), Stephen M. Kohn writes: "By the end of the Vietnam War, the Selective Service System was demoralized and frustrated. It was increasingly difficult to induct men into the army. There was more and more illegal resistance, and the popularity of resistance was rising. The draft was all but dead."

Vietnam War protestors march at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. on October 21, 1967.

By Frank Wolfe - Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Wikimedia.org

The movement's crippling of the draft system was not the only major achievement of the antiwar movement omitted from the Burns/Novick epic. The film shows scenes from the March on the Pentagon in 1967, where more than 25,000 protesters confronted thousands of Army troops. But it does not tell us that the Pentagon demonstration and the increasingly radical antiwar movement were among the factors that led Johnson to refuse General Westmoreland's pending request for 206,000 more troops and why the president himself refused to run for another term just six months later. (The Vietnam Peace Commemoration Committee is holding a gathering October 20-21 in Washington, D.C. to mark the 50th anniversary of the march.)

Likewise, the film shows footage from both the Moratorium on October 15, 1969 (demonstrations that drew more than two million people in hundreds of towns and campuses) and the Mobilization in Washington the next month, which drew more than half a million marchers (the largest single demonstration in American history until the Women's March earlier this year). Unfortunately, Burns and Novick do not tell us about the impact of the peace movement's fall offensive: It forced Nixon to abandon his plans for bombing the dykes of North Vietnam and/or using tactical nuclear weapons. This story was not known at the time, but numerous historians have written about it based on interviews with Nixon administration officials, documents from the period, and White House tapes.

Another missed opportunity: We see scenes of the massive demonstrations throughout the country—and on college campuses—in reaction to the Cambodian invasion and the killings at Kent State and Jackson State. That eruption forced Nixon to withdraw from Cambodia prematurely, another point Burns and Novick failed to tell.

Meanwhile, the scenes related to Daniel Ellsberg's release of the Pentagon Papers in 1971 do not make

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clear that Nixon's reaction led directly to Watergate and his resignation. Had Burns and Novick also interviewed Ellsberg, who is alive and well in California, they would have discovered that the most significant individual act of civil disobedience during the war was inspired by the example set by draft resisters.

Finally, the film does not explain that Congress cut off funds to the war largely because of the intensive lobbying efforts by such groups as the American Friends Service Committee and Indochina Peace Campaign, or IPC, led by Tom Hayden and Jane Fonda. Don't take my word for it. In his testimony before Congress the year after the fall of Saigon, the last U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam blamed the peace movement's lobbying efforts for eliminating the funds needed to forestall the final North Vietnamese offensive. Not mentioning IPC's lobbying efforts is particularly puzzling since the only peace movement activist interviewed for the series was Bill Zimmerman, one of IPC's principal organizers. We hear opinions from Zimmerman about a variety of other issues, but absolutely nothing about the organization he describes in detail in his memoir.

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All these omissions and distortions notwithstanding, we must credit this 18-hour epic as one of the most powerful antiwar films of all time. *The Vietnam War* certainly rivals *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Just as that World War I classic portrays the nightmare of trench warfare, Burns and Novick show horrific scene after horrific scene of mutilated bodies and corpses. Through the words of combatants on both sides, you can almost feel what it's like having bullets and shrapnel flying at you and watching your buddies get hit while you're trying to kill other human beings.

You may find yourself emotionally drained after watching countless gruesome battles and stomach-churning scenes of mutilated Vietnamese peasants and torched villages. Several of my friends stopped viewing after two or three episodes because they found it too upsetting. Still, I encourage you to view it if you haven't already.

Burns and Novick do more than immerse you in blood. They demonstrate the callousness, ignorance, and hubris of the warmakers. You can hear tapes of John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Robert McNamara revealing that they knew from the outset that the war was unwinnable and that more combat troops and bombings would not change the outcome. Yet they lied to the public and sent hundreds upon thousands of Americans into the fray, while dropping more tons of bombs on Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia than the total tonnage of bombs exploded by all combatants in World War II. You can also hear Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger cynically plotting to prolong the war for four more years so that he could run in 1972 without the stain of losing Vietnam to the communists.

Mounted policemen watch a Vietnam War protest march in San Francisco, April 15, 1967, as thousands of marchers stream by.

Photo by George Garrigues. Wikimedia.org

Generals and battlefield commanders in Vietnam show just as little regard for the lives and limbs of their men as their bosses in Washington. Soldiers fight valiantly to capture hills, where dozens are killed or maimed only to have their leaders tell them to abandon their conquests.

It's no wonder then that, almost without exception, the American soldiers tell the filmmakers that they now believe the war was senseless and feel betrayed. Many voice support for the anti-war movement. Some even proudly became part of the GI resistance movement after they returned home. (My brother-in-law, who served two tours of duty in Vietnam and later joined the Secret Service, expressed the same sentiment when he told me, "We were suckers.")

Burns and Novick should also be applauded for incorporating numerous Vietnamese soldiers on both sides of the civil war. By humanizing "the enemy," the film goes beyond a condemnation of American perfidy in Vietnam and becomes an indictment of war itself. Particularly touching is hearing a North Vietnamese officer talk of how his unit spent three days in mourning after losing over half of his men in a particularly bloody skirmish. (They did not do as good a job portraying the toll on Vietnamese civilians, however.)

We also see how North Vietnam's leaders mirrored their counterparts in Washington by consistently lying to their citizens and by callously sending tens of thousands of their young on suicidal offensives that had little chance of success. Similarly, the filmmakers get beneath the surface enough to reveal who actually fought the war. Just as the overwhelming majority of American soldiers were working class or minorities, the North Vietnamese side was composed almost entirely of peasants and workers. Meanwhile, children of Hanoi's elite went to the safe environs of Moscow to further their education. Back in the United States, children of the white upper middle class and the privileged found safety in their student and other draft deferments.

Student protesters marching down Langdon Street at the University of Wisconsin-Madison during the Vietnam War era.

UW Digital Collections **Wikimedia.org**

Military recruiters would hate to have any of their potential enlistees watch this series. Those who sit through all 10 episodes will have a tough time discerning significant differences between the war in Vietnam and the ones in Iraq or Afghanistan. Common themes abound: lies, pointless battles, mindless violence, corruption, stupidity.

Unfortunately, most viewers will justifiably feel totally overwhelmed and helpless by the end of this epic film. That's why it's important to spotlight the misrepresentations and underestimations of the peace movement. For the success of the anti-Vietnam war movement provides hope and illustrates the power of resistance.

Rarely in history have citizens been effective in challenging a war. Other unpopular American conflicts have had their protesters—the Mexican, Civil and Spanish-American Wars, World War I, and more recently the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Opposition typically fizzled out soon after troops were sent into action. Not so in the case of Vietnam. No other antiwar cause has developed a movement nearly as massive, endured as long, or accomplished as much as the struggle against the Vietnam war.

The Vietnam peace movement provides an inspiring example of the power of ordinary citizens willing to stand up to the world's most powerful government in a time of war. Its story deserves to be told fairly and fully. ✡

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