

Critical Review of *The Vietnam War*
The PBS Documentary Film
Directed by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick
By
Vinh-The Lam

I have viewed twice the complete set of 10 DVDs of *The Vietnam War* directed by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick. During the second viewing, I have carefully taken notes, based on which I wrote this critical review.

General Comments on the Movie

On the Two Directors

As professional filmmakers, both directors possess excellent credentials as being graduates from prestigious colleges, and having received several nominations and awards for their documentary films.

As individuals, being born in 1953 (Burns) and 1962 (Novick), they both were too young to go to the War. They can be expected and trusted in making this documentary as objective as they possibly can. However, when they grew up, and went to colleges (around 1971 for Burns and 1980 for Novick), they just could not escape the anti-Vietnam war mood that had permeated the entire American society. For Burns, he has been a Democrat for many years, and he has produced a couple of movies honoring Senator Edward Kennedy, one of the famous antiwar figures in the U.S. Congress, and also one of those legislators that helped cut military aid and abandoned the Republic of Vietnam in 1975.

Objectives and Audience of the Movie

It is pretty obvious that this documentary *was made for American viewers*. It tries to answer the following questions: 1) How did the U.S. get involved? ; 2) What were the fighting conditions of the U.S. soldiers and how did they behave during the

War? ; 3) What did the American people think about the War, and what were their actions/reactions? ; and, 4) Why did the Communists win? The Vietnamese viewers, even for those who have become American citizens, are just secondary audience. It is no surprise, therefore, that throughout the whole set of 10 DVDs of this documentary the viewers will not be presented with much of the actions and casualties of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) as well as the sacrifices and losses (both in terms of human lives and properties) of the South Vietnamese people. An American critic, Dan Schindel, has used a very precise term –shortchange—to describe that inadequacy in his review *In Ken Burns' Vietnam War documentary, claims of objectivity obscure patriotic bias*: **“Among other things, the show shortchanges the experiences of the Vietnamese civilians.”** (The URL for this article is as follows: <https://hyperallergic.com/408347/in-ken-burnss-vietnam-war-documentary-claims-of-objectivity-obscure-patriotic-bias/>)

Uses of documents and Interviewees

Because this is a documentary film, the two directors have made use of a large quantity of audio and video tapes recorded during the time of the Vietnam War. The most special of these documents are the now declassified tapes of phone conversations between President Johnson with Defense Secretary McNamara, and President Nixon with National Security Advisor Kissinger. Those secret exchanges are undeniable evidence of U.S. government intentions in its conduct of the war.

Burns and Novick were making their best efforts to interview a large number of peoples from all sides, US, North Vietnam, Viet Cong, and South Vietnam, but, unfortunately, the statistics regarding the interviewees show an unbalanced representation:

- US: 51 persons (64.5%)
- South Vietnam: 8 persons (10.1%)
- North Vietnam (14) and Viet Cong (6): 20 persons (25.3%)

The American interviewees, including all categories, civilians, military personnel, journalists, war supporters, antiwar activists, even draft dodgers and deserters, comprise almost 2/3 of the people interviewed. For the Vietnamese interviewees, the number of communists is more than double the people from the South.

Among the 8 South Vietnamese interviewees, there are 5 military men: 1) Lieutenant-General Lâm Quang Thi, Commander of the Forward Command of I Corps in 1975; 2) Brigadier-General Phạm Duy Tất, Commander of II Corps Ranger Groups during the retreat from Pleiku in March 1975; 3) Lieutenant-Colonel Trần Ngọc Châu, former Province Chief of Kiến Hòa (1964-1965), and later Secretary-General of the

National Assembly; 4) Lieutenant-Colonel Trần Ngọc Huế, hero of the Battle of Huế in 1968, later a prisoner-of-war captured by the North Vietnamese Army during the Lam Sơn 719 Campaign in Laos; and, 5) Major Trần Ngọc Toàn, a graduate of the 16th Class of the Dalat National Military Academy, when still a First-Lieutenant, Commander of 1st Company, 4th Battalion, Vietnamese Marines Corps, badly wounded at the Battle of Bình Giã in 1965, later in 1972, as a Major, Commander of the same Marine battalion. The remaining 3 Vietnamese interviewees are civilians: 1) Ambassador Bùi Diễm; 2) Mrs Dương Văn Mai Elliott, a Vietnamese woman married to an American, working in the 1960s as a translator for Rand Corporation, a US think-tank having undertaken several research studies for the CIA; and, 3) Phan Quang Tuệ, an attorney and Immigration Judge in California, son of Dr. Phan Quang Đán, former Vice-Premier of the Republic of Vietnam. Except for Mrs. Elliott, all Vietnamese interviewees had only a few short appearances in the movie. All of this shows very clearly that the two filmmakers did not give justice to the South Vietnamese people, who had been the principal direct victims of the painful losses and destructions caused by the War initiated by North Vietnam but did not have their words in the movie. I personally tend to agree with Dan Schindel.

General Comments on the Film

The first general comment is that the film provides ***a fairly complete picture of the War***: its causes, its course, its impact on the U.S. population, and its consequences. The two directors have spent a significant amount of time (10 years) to dig up and select necessary historical documents (both graphic and audio), and to interview people, who had, directly or indirectly, some role in the War and let them express their points of view, and/or recount their experiences. There is no doubt that the film succeeds in its presentation of the War as the second-most divisive war in the US history (only after the US Civil War, 1861-1865).

The second general comment is that the two directors have shown that they have been deeply obsessed with the fighting conditions of the American soldiers. I do not have any statistics from the film, i.e., how many scenes, how many minutes, etc, but I can say that any viewer would agree with me that the film is flooded with pictures of the American soldiers in fighting in the jungles, in the rice paddies, on the hills, in towns and villages, in fire bases, etc., even in episodes that are dealing with other topics. For example: Episode 1, “Déjà vu” (1858-1961), with the last year of this period of time, ***1961, being four years before the U.S. sent its first combat troops to Vietnam***, also contains several scenes of the American soldiers in combat.

The third general comment is that the two filmmakers have tried really hard to keep their objectivity by not directly presenting their point of view of the War. In most of the 10 episodes, they just let the interviewees freely express their points of view. The film viewers, therefore, are provided with statements from the interviewees expressing

their knowledge and beliefs, regardless of their positions: Americans supporting the War, Americans against the War, Vietnamese from the South, Vietnamese from the North. It is quite clear that the filmmakers only want to provide the viewers with the most information available, i.e. widening their perspectives so that they would be able to understand and tolerate one another. The two captions ***Conflict / Perspective / Understanding*** and ***Because we believe with perspective comes understanding*** are repeated at the start of every episode.

The last general comment is that it is very probable that because of their abundant and ready availability, American documents are heavily used in the film, with North Vietnamese documents coming second while South Vietnamese documents coming last.

Specific Comments on Each Episode

Episode 1, “Déjà Vu” (1858-1961)

This 1st episode’s main objective is to introduce Hồ Chí Minh as a Vietnamese patriot, who led the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) and the Việt Minh to fight against the French and finally gained independence for Viet Nam in 1945. But at the 1954 Geneva Conference, under pressure from both China and the Soviet Union, he had to accept the temporary division of Vietnam at the 17th parallel, waiting for the General Election in 1956 to reunify his country. After the Geneva Conference, the United States supported the creation of Ngô Đình Diệm regime, which later became the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) and fought against the North. The General Election of 1956 was never to be held. North Vietnam, therefore, had no choice but to start the war to seize the South and reunify the country. Obviously, North Vietnam was the “good guy”, and South Vietnam was the “bad guy.”

In general, this thesis includes some historical truths. However, while expounding that thesis, the two filmmakers are not really objective because they have, intentionally or not, ignored some other historical truths that are also very important:

- During the French domination in Vietnam, in terms of political organizations and parties, ***the VCP was neither the first nor the only one to fight against the French***. In the latter part of the 19th century there were already many anti-French resistance movements, e.g., Cần Vương (Response to the Call of the Emperor), Văn Thân (Movement of the Intellectuals), Đông Du (Journey East), etc. At the beginning of the 20th century, many political parties were created, e.g., Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng

(Vietnam Nationalist Party), Đại Việt Đảng (Greater Viet Party), Duy Dân Đảng (Populist Party), Tân Việt Cách Mạng Đảng (New Viet Revolutionary Party), etc. The Yên Bái Uprising launched by the Vietnam Nationalist Party occurred even before the creation of the VCP in 1930. As a person, ***Hồ Chí Minh was neither the first nor the only one patriot to fight against the French.*** As Vietnamese, we have learned and known (from elementary schools) the names of our anti-French patriots and heroes: Nguyễn Trung Trực, Thủ Khoa Nghĩa, Thủ Khoa Huân, Phan Đình Phùng, Nguyễn Thiện Thuật, Hoàng Hoa Thám, etc. of the 19th century; and Phan Bội Châu, Phan Châu Trinh, Kỳ Ngoại Hầu Cường Để, Tạ Thu Thâu, Nguyễn An Ninh, Phan Văn Hùm, etc. of the early 20th century.

- Episode 1 does not give any information regarding the Trần Trọng Kim government (March – August 1945), which was the first Vietnamese government declaring Vietnam's independence and abolishing all unequal treaties imposed on the Nguyễn Dynasty by the French in the 19th century. Episode 1 has provided some information on the big famine in North Vietnam at the beginning of 1945, and has mentioned the Việt Minh's action of breaking the rice depots controlled by the Japanese Army and distributing rice to the people. But Episode 1 was completely silent on the effort by the Trần Trọng Kim government regarding the famine issue.^[1] Episode 1 also ignores Ex-Emperor Bảo Đại, who created the State of Vietnam and struggled with the French to regain Nam Kỳ (Cochinchina) for the State of Vietnam. It was Chief-of-State Bảo Đại who nominated Ngô Đình Diệm as Premier in July 1954.
- Episode 1 has also mentioned about the Land Reform in North Vietnam but put it in the period after the post-1954 Communist take-over. This is not entirely accurate. The Communist Land Reform was started in 1953 and because of its brutal implementation a large number of Northerners have left the Resistance Movement and started moving back to the cities. After the signing of the 1954 Geneva Accords, these people have massively (around one million) moved to the South. Episode 1 has also mentioned of the purge of nationalists by the VCP in 1946. In this episode the viewers have learned that during the time Hồ Chí Minh was in France for the Fontainebleau Conference, Võ Nguyên Giáp carried out that

liquidation of the nationalists. In another scene, Lt-General Lâm Quang Thi also confirmed that VM had assassinated many people. Both presentations probably take a total of about 20 seconds. The viewers, therefore, if they do not watch the movie with really great interest, would not be able to notice and/or remember them. The historical truth is that the intentional elimination of the patriotic nationalists was a top policy of the VCP that had been carried out long before the Resistance War against the French in 1946. A very large number of the surviving nationalist party members and the patriotic intellectuals and notables, who had joined the Resistance War (especially those in the South who took the maquis during the Fall of 1945, more than a year before the Resistance War beginning on December 19, 1946 in the North), decided to leave the VM, came back to the cities, and later on joined the Government of the State of Vietnam established by Ex-Emperor Bảo Đại. A very noted example was the case of Mr. Trần Văn Hương (two-time Saigon Mayor, two-time Premier, Vice-President and President of the Republic of Vietnam), who had joined the resistance very early (right after August 23rd, 1945) and assumed the Chairmanship of the Administrative Committee of Resistance (Ủy Ban Hành Kháng) of the Province of Tây Ninh. After he found out the real face of the VM, he left the Resistance and came back to Saigon, but refused to cooperate with French authorities. He was nominated and accepted the position of Mayor of Saigon when Ngô Đình Diệm came back from exile and formed his first government in July 1954. All of these historical truths prove that ***South Vietnam, or the Republic of Vietnam, was not the bad guy*** as could be misunderstood by the viewers of this Episode.

Episode 2: “Riding the Tiger” (1961-1963)

This Episode presents the important military and political events of the period of 1961-1963 in South Vietnam leading to the termination of the First Republic of South Vietnam: 1) The Battle of Ấp Bắc; 2) The mismanagement of the Strategic Hamlet Program resulting in loss of support of the South Vietnamese population for Ngô Đình Diệm regime; and 3) The Buddhist Crisis of 1963 leading to the US Government's

decision to give the green light to the South Vietnamese generals to overthrow the Ngô Đình Diệm dictatorial government on November 1st, 1963.

The movie gives a fairly complete picture of the Battle of Ấp Bắc, the first battalion-level encounter by the Việt Cộng (VC) with the Army of the Republic of Viet Nam (ARVN). Objectively, we have to admit that this battle was a quite serious defeat for the ARVN, with 80 killed and almost 200 wounded, also with the death of 3 American advisors and the loss of 5 helicopters. In any war, militarily, winning or losing a battle is something everyone has to accept as a norm. From the time the National Front for the Liberation of South Viet Nam (or NFL or VC) was created in December 1960, VC forces have lost numerous battles (e.g., the Battle of Cao Lãnh, in the Province of Kiến Phong, on 28-March-1961, when more than 2 VC battalions attacked 1 ARVN battalion and suffered serious loss with around 200 killed and wounded against ARVN's loss of 11 killed and 23 wounded ^[2]) but none was ever mentioned in this Episode. Moreover, the recount of this battle, one that the ARVN was losing, was given with details but based solely on the report of Neil Sheehan, a well-known anti-war reporter and author, and on statements by the US advisor, James Scanlon. There is no input from any of the participating ARVN officers, especially from Brigadier-General Lý Tòng Bá, who was then Captain commanding the Company of the APC (Armored Personnel Carrier) M113 at the battle. In his memoir, General Bá has said that Sheehan's report was untrue ^[3] and he has also given unflattering comments on James Scanlon's behavior at the front. ^[4] General Bá passed away on 22-Feb-2015 in Las Vegas, Nevada, US. When Burns and Novick began this documentary project in 2007 General Ba was still alive but he was not interviewed by the filmmakers.

Episode 2 provides a completely true account on the issue of the Strategic Hamlet Program. This program was an excellent idea for the Government of the Republic of Vietnam (GVN) to fight against the VC but its implementation was a disaster caused by the following serious and fatal mistakes: 1) The GVN's eagerness led to its quantity-oriented implementation; 2) Because of that, the GVN did not have enough time to explain and persuade the rural population; and 3) Total lack of control of provincial and local authorities resulting in brutal abuse of local people: they were forced to do labor work without compensation while the provincial and district chiefs pocketed the compensation money provided by the GVN through US financial aid; the results were not hard to predict: the GVN was losing the badly needed popular support.

This Episode also provides the viewers with a very accurate account of the 1963 Buddhist Crisis in South Vietnam. From 1960 onward, the Ngô Đình Diệm government has become a family-based dictatorship strongly hated by the South Vietnamese population. A group of politicians and notables met at the Caravelle Hotel in downtown Saigon (thus later known as the Caravelle Group) and came up with a strong political manifest against the Diệm Government. It is noteworthy that the majority of them

(10/18) had been co-operating with Ngô Đình Diệm when the latter had just come back from exile. Eight of these ten people even had held various positions of ministers in Diem's government. They were: 1) Trần Văn Đỗ (Minister of Foreign Affairs); 2) Phan Khắc Sửu (Minister of Agriculture); 3) Nguyễn Tăng Nguyên (Minister of Labor and Youth); 4) Phạm Hữu Chương (Minister of Health and Social Affairs); 4) Lê Quang Luật (Minister of Information); 6) Lê Ngọc Chấn (Minister of Defense); 7) Lương Trọng Tường (Minister of Economy); and, 8) Huỳnh Kim Hữu (Minister of Health). The remaining two were: 1) Trần Văn Hương (Mayor of Saigon); and 2) Nguyễn Lưu Viên (High Commissioner for Refugees).^[5] Ngô Đình Diệm was also losing support from the US Government, and, finally, even his best American friends and allies abandoned him.^[6] The 1963 Buddhist Crisis was just the last drop to a full glass; the US Government lost its patience and gave the green light to the South Vietnamese generals to overthrow the Diệm Government. The coup d'état happened on November 1st, 1963 and was welcomed by most South Vietnamese people, but, probably not supported by 100% of the population like this statement in Episode 2: ***“Ambassador Lodge reported to Washington that “every Vietnamese has a smile on his face.””***

Episode 3, “The River Styx” (January 1964 – December 1965)

This episode presents the military and political events in Vietnam and in the US forcing the US Government, under President Lyndon B. Johnson, who took over after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas, Texas on 22 November 1963, to make the decision of sending US combat troops to Vietnam: 1) The Battle of Bình Giã (Dec / 1964 – Jan / 1965); 2) The Gulf of Tonkin Incident; 3) US Presidential Election of 1964; and 4) US Marines landing at Danang on March 8th, 1965.

The Battle of Bình Giã was a landmark battle when, for the first time, the VC was engaging their troops at the regiment level (Regiment Q761) against one battalion of the ARVN: the elite 4th Battalion of the Vietnamese Marines Corps. The ARVN 4th Marines Battalion was suffering very serious losses as follows: 1) Killed: 11 officers, 18 NCOs, and 83 soldiers, for a total of 112; 2) Missing: 2 officers, 10 NCOs, and 70 soldiers, for a total of 82; and 3) Wounded: 5 officers, 15 NCOs, and 100 soldiers, for a total of 120 ^[7] Just like with the Battle of Ấp Bắc in Episode 2, the filmmakers chose the Battle of Bình Giã for presentation in this Episode because it was a battle that the ARVN lost.

The presentation of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident in this episode is quite complete and accurate. The film reveals a new and important detail in this statement: ***“Johnson felt he did not yet have the political capital to take further action in Vietnam, but he asked his aide, William Bundy, to draft a congressional resolution authorizing him to use force in Vietnam if needed to be sent to Capitol Hill when the time was right.”*** It seems that suggest that Johnson was setting up a trap and North Vietnam was willingly jumping into it. This episode also implied that it was Lê Duẩn who ordered

the attack without Hồ Chí Minh's knowledge because at that time Lê Duẩn also wanted to escalate the fight in the South. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was passed by the US Congress by an absolute margin: in the House it was 416/0, and in the Senate 88/2.

The US Presidential Election of 1964 resulted in a landslide victory for the Johnson / Humphrey Democratic ticket as follows:

- Popular vote: 43,127,041 (or 61.1%) votes for Johnson against 27,175,764 (or 38.5%) for Goldwater
- Electorate vote: 486 for Johnson (44 states + DC) against 52 for Goldwater (only 6 states)

Johnson has now obtained the **“political capital”** that he wanted and needed. He accepted the request from General William C. Westmoreland, Commander of MACV (Military Assistance Command – Vietnam) to have 2 US Marines battalions landed at Đà Nẵng on March 8th, 1965. This episode contains an interview of Ambassador Bùi Diễm about this important event. Mr. Bùi, at the time of the Marines landing, was Minister at the Prime Minister's Office for the Phan Huy Quát government. In the interview, he gives the same account of the event, exactly like the one he has given in his memoir, *In the jaws of history* (published by Indiana University Press, 1999): the GVN was in complete surprise. The author of this review is not really convinced by the Ambassador's account in his memoir and, therefore, has tried to dig up more and new information about that event, and published an article on the topic.^[8] After the Marines landing, more and more US combat troops were brought in, and by the end of 1965, US troops were up to more than 184,000.

This episode also provides the viewers with a misleading piece of information in the following statement: **“Between January 1964 and June 1965 there would be eight different governments.”** In fact, there were only 5 governments as follows:^[9]

- Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ government: from 3-Nov-1963 to 7-Jan-1964
- Nguyễn Khánh government: from 8-Jan-1964 to 3-Nov-1964
- Trần Văn Hương government: from 4-Nov-1964 to 15-Feb-1965
- Phan Huy Quát government: from 16-Feb-1965 to 18-Jun-1965
- Nguyễn Cao Kỳ government: from 19-Jun-1965 – onward

Episode 4: “Resolve” (January 1966 – June 1967)

Episode 4 gives account of the period during which the US Government has resolved to escalate the Vietnam War, increasing the US troop level to almost half a million (more than 450,000 in mid-1967). During this period of time, the anti-war movement has greatly developed in the US, in particular within the US Congress with the Fulbright Hearings. Because of the need to increase the draft from 10,000 to

30,000 a year, college students were now affected too. The anti-war movement was expanding rapidly into university campuses. Another important development during this period of time was the fact that Defense Secretary Robert McNamara began to have doubts about the War. He gave order to his aides to start looking into US Government classified document to learn how the US was getting involved in Vietnam. This effort ultimately led to the publication of ***The Pentagon Papers***.

Throughout the whole DVD of this episode, the viewers do not see any footage on activities of the ARVN for this period of time, ***while, in reality, statistics have shown that during this 18-month period of the war, the ARVN has carried out a total of 69 big code-named operations (mostly code-named Lam Sơn or Củu Long, with a number, beside the other big encounters with the VC).***^[10, 11] The filmmakers only presented scenes of battles between the US troops and the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) or scenes of activities of the NVA or its workers on the Hồ Chí Minh Trail. There are only two events related to the GVN: 1) The Honolulu Summit (February 1966) between President Johnson and the two South Vietnamese generals Nguyễn Văn Thiệu and Nguyễn Cao Kỳ; and, 2) The 1966 Civil Revolt in Central Vietnam, with a quite sarcastic comment on the ARVN as follows: ***“But from his command post on a hilltop outside the city, an American Marines lieutenant had watched in disbelief as two battles unfolded simultaneously: in the west, his fellow Marines were fighting the Viet Cong; in the east, the South Vietnamese army seemed to be at war with itself.”***

Episode 5: “This Is What We Do” (July 1967 – December 1967)

Again, just like Episode 4, the viewers do not see any activities of the ARVN during this 6-month period of the war. The whole DVD is mostly used to present 3 things: 1) Activities of US Marines close to the DMZ, in particular at Cồn Thiến; 2) Preparations of North Vietnam for the Tet Offensive; and 3) Anti-war movement activities in the US. Regarding the GVN, Episode 5 has only one short footage on the 1967 South Vietnamese presidential election in which the military ticket Thiệu-Kỳ won with only 35% of the votes.

The most important part of this episode was the presentation of the North Vietnamese preparations for the Tet Offensive. The film shows clearly that First Secretary Lê Duẩn was really in absolute control of the VCP’s Politburo. Regarding the war, Lê Duẩn’s position was to take the South by force, which Hồ Chí Minh and Võ Nguyên Giáp did not favor. Hồ Chí Minh was sent to Beijing for medical treatment, and Võ Nguyên Giáp was sent to Hungary for the same reason. All opposing elements in the party were imprisoned for reason of “being revisionists or anti-party.” Lê Duẩn also believed that the “oppressed” South Vietnamese people were ripe for a General Uprising following a General Offensive by the VC and the NVA, and this would lead to a

total collapse of the GVN and force the US to withdraw. Therefore, the planned General Offensive should focus on the cities of the South and in order to do that a secondary offensive should take place at various points along the borders to move US forces out of the cities. We will see the results of these miscalculations by Lê Duẩn in the next episode.

Episode 6: “Things Fall Apart” (January 1968 – July 1968)

This episode chiefly presents the main phases and, more importantly, the consequences of the Tet Offensive by the Communist forces.

It is safe to say that, for the people who have actually lived in South Vietnam during that time, ***the filmmakers have tried their best to provide an accurate and objective presentation of the Tet Offensive.***

First of all, the film confirms Lê Duẩn was one hundred percent wrong in his predictions about the collapse of the ARVN and the uprising of the South Vietnamese population in the following statement: ***“Hanoi’s leaders had assumed the ARVN would crumble, that South Vietnamese soldiers would come over to their side. Instead, not a single unit defected. The civilian populace Hanoi expected to rise up may have been unhappy with their government, but they had little sympathy for communism, and when the fighting began, they had hidden in their homes to escape the fury in the streets.”*** Episode 6 gives additional complimentary observations of the resistance provided by US and ARVN troops as follows: ***“Most assaults were being quickly beaten back by the ARVN and American forces,” “Viet Cong units were taking heavy losses from U.S. troops and determined South Vietnamese forces.”*** For the courageous fighting in an almost desperate situation of the soldiers of the 1st Infantry Division under the Command of Brigadier-General Ngô Quang Trưởng in Huế, the film makes the following praising comment: ***“It would take two weeks for the Marines to fight their way across the river to support the ARVN, who had stubbornly kept the enemy from overwhelming their division headquarters in the Citadel.”***

The movie also confirms the heavy losses of the Communists during the Tet Offensive in the following statements: ***“Everywhere the enemy was suffering terrible losses.” “North Vietnamese General Võ Nguyên Giáp, who had opposed the offensive from the beginning, later remembered that Tet had been a “costly lesson, paid for in blood and bone.”***” North Vietnamese author Huy Đức, in his interview, told the filmmakers that: ***“Several high-ranking officers of the North Vietnamese Army surrendered. That had never happened before. No unit was left intact. Some companies had only two or three men left.”*** Lê Văn Cho, a NVA veteran, also said about the terrible loss of his unit as follows: ***“We seized the Quảng***

Trị Citadel. We held it for a day and a night. 600 from my unit went in. More than 300 were killed. Around 100 were captured.” A high-ranking NVA officer, Colonel Cao Xuân Đài, also confirms: ***“All of our battalion commanders were killed.”*** The film also provides the numbers of casualties of Communist forces as follows: ***“Of the 84,000 enemy troops who are estimated to have taken part in the Tet Offensive, more than half--as many as 58,000 men and women most of them Viet Cong—are thought to have been killed or wounded or captured.”***

It is really sad, and unfortunate too, that although the Tet Offensive was a big military defeat for the NVA and the VC, the US Government and President Johnson were unable to seize the momentum. Instead they succumbed to the pressure exercised on them by the totally anti-war media and decided to de-escalate: implementing the bombing halt, and inviting North Vietnam to the negotiating table.

Regarding the Communist massacre in Huế, for the first time, the film is successful in getting corroborative statements from some NVA veterans. Nguyễn Ngọc, a former NVA colonel, and now a North Vietnamese famous author said: ***“I don’t know if the order came from a local commander or from a higher level. They killed people who worked for the South Vietnamese government and for the American military. But they also killed people who had been wrongly arrested. It was a massacre. It was a stain. It was an atrocity of war.”*** Another NVA vet, Hồ Hữu Lân, also stated: ***“In Huế, the suppression and purge of the Saigon administration was brutal. We rarely speak of it. I’m willing to talk about it, but many others are not. I’m telling you the truth as I understand it. So please be careful making your film because I could get in trouble.”***

It is quite regrettable that the filmmakers could not resist repeating this one-sided story of General Nguyễn Ngọc Loan executing the VC terrorist Nguyễn Văn Lém, aka Bảy Lốp. The movie is showing repeatedly, 3 or 4 times, the photo of this execution but does not give any account of the following statement by Eddie Adams, the reporter-photographer who took the picture: ***“The General killed the Viet Cong; I killed the general with my camera. Still photographs are the most powerful weapon in the world. People believe them; but photographs do lie, even without manipulation. They are only half-truths. What the photograph didn’t say was, “What would you do if you were the General at that time and place on that hot day, and you caught the so-called bad guy after he blew away one, two or three American soldiers?”*** ^[12]

Episode 7: “The Veneer of Civilization” (June 1968 – May 1969)

This episode presents the political events and atmosphere surrounding the US Presidential Election of 1968, which resulted in a very close win by the Republican

candidate Richard M. Nixon. It also gives some account of the difficult beginning of the Paris Peace Talks.

The movie provides the viewers with two pieces of information that are not really new but probably are presented publicly for the first time.

The first one is related to the Republican candidate Nixon and the Paris Peace Talks. Most people are probably aware of the fact that Nixon has secretly approached South Vietnamese President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu and advised him not to send his delegation to the Paris Peace Talks on 30-Oct-1968.^[13] President Johnson has been informed of this activity by both the FBI and the CIA. He phoned Nixon and Nixon flatly denied. The viewers can listen to this taped phone conversation in Episode 7.

The second thing is related to the fact that children of North Vietnamese leaders did not go the war. Episode 7 confirms this fact in the following statement: ***“The sons of some party officials and their friends were sent abroad to escape the draft.”*** North Vietnamese author Huy Đức gives much more specific and accurate information in his interview: ***“Some leaders sent their children to the front, but they were the minority. Most leaders’ children, like Lê Duẩn’s children, were sent to the Soviet Union to study.”*** To back up these statements, the film also provides some footage of North Vietnamese students in the Soviet Union, apparently enjoying their stay there.

Episode 8: “The History of the World” (April 1969 – May 1970)

This episode presents the important military and political events of the period of April 1969 and May 1970: 1) Beginning of the US troop withdrawal; 2) Vietnamization; 3) Beginning of US-North Vietnam secret talks in Paris; 3) Mỹ Lai massacre by US troops; 5) Violent demonstrations on US college campuses leading to the shooting of 4 students at Kent State; 6) Death of Hồ Chí Minh; and, 7) US and ARVN troops crossing the border into Cambodia.

This episode also gives some praising statements regarding the fighting spirit of the ARVN: ***“Many ARVN units did fight well. They had borne the brunt of the fighting during the Tet Offensive, and, by the mid of 1969, 90,000 of them had been killed in combat. Their bravery was often overlooked by Americans.”***

Episode 9: “A Disrespectful Loyalty” (May 1970 – March 1973)

We can say that this episode is one of the most important parts of the whole documentary, presenting military and political events in both Vietnam and the US during this period of almost two years, leading to the signing of the Paris Peace Accords on January 27, 1973: 1) The ARVN Operation Lam Sơn 719 into Laos in Feb-Mar/1971; 2) The Easter Offensive in 1972; 3) Anti-war activities among Vietnam veterans: John

Kerry hearings, medal trashing by Vietnam veterans on Capitol Hill; 4) Concessions by Kissinger at the Paris secret talks leading to President Thiệu's rejecting the agreement; 5) Publication of the Pentagon Papers; and 6) The Christmas Bombing leading to the signing of the Paris Peace Accords.

The ARVN operation into Laos in February 1971, code-named Lam Sơn 719, was a huge corps-level operation, commanded by Lt-General Hoàng Xuân Lãm, Commander of I Corps, involving units of the 3 elite divisions, namely the Airborne Division, the Marines Division and the 1st Infantry Division. The main objective of Lam Sơn 719 was the destruction of North Vietnamese supply depots along the Hồ Chí Minh Trail with the focus being the Laotian town called Tchepone.^[14, 15] ARVN troops have actually captured Tchepone, tried to get out as fast as they could but still suffered heavy losses. Episode 9 gives the following account: ***"Although individual ARVN units fought bravely the invasion was a failure." "Almost half of the 17,000 South Vietnamese, who entered Laos, would be killed, wounded or captured."*** In his interview, Lt-Colonel Trần Ngọc Huế, Commander of the 2/2 Battalion, 1st Infantry Division, described casualties of his battalion as follows: ***"My battalion finally was surrounded, I was wounded three times. You know how much my battalion survive? About 50 soldiers and men. And when we go there you know how much? About 600."*** For political reason, however, both U.S. and South Vietnamese governments declared victory, confirmed that Vietnamization was a success and the U.S. could continue its troop withdrawal. President Nixon stated in his TV speech to the nation: ***"Consequently, tonight, I can report that Vietnamization has succeeded. Because of the increased strength of the South Vietnamese, because of the success of the Cambodian operation, because of the South Vietnamese operation in Laos, I am announcing an increase in the rate of American withdrawals."***

On March 3rd, 1972, the 101st Airborne Division was the last U.S. combat troop unit leaving South Vietnam. When the Easter Offensive began on March 30th, 1972, the ARVN was alone in its fighting against the NVA divisions on all three fronts in Quảng Trị, Kontum, and An Lộc, with only U.S. air support. Episode gives an accurate report on the effective and successful U.S. air support by B-52 bombers in An Lộc, but does not mention enough on the courageous fighting and tremendous sacrifices of the ARVN in other fronts during the Easter Offensive, especially during the recapture of the Quảng Trị Citadel, later recognized as the bloodiest battle of the Vietnam War. Just for the South Vietnamese Marines Division, the casualties were: 3,500 killed and several thousand wounded.^[16]

Episode 9 also objectively reveals the back-stabbing of the GVN by Kissinger in his secret talks with Hanoi: ***"At the secret talks in Paris, Kissinger had offered his North Vietnamese counterpart, Le Duc Tho, the most significant concessions that United States had yet made: North Vietnam could keep its troops in the***

South—ten of thousands of them. And in exchange for the release of American prisoners of war, all American troops will be withdrawn within seven months... Thiệu knew nothing about the new American concessions to Hanoi.”

Regarding The Pentagon Papers, this episode also gives an accurate account of Nixon’s efforts and failure in blocking its publication. He then ordered the Department of Justice to prosecute Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked the information to the press. At the beginning, Nixon did not worry much about this problem since it seemed to possibly create more problems to the Democrats than to the Republicans. And then Kissinger pointed out to him the possibility that if he did not react strongly enough the leak could be widened and would reveal even his own secrets, e.g, the Thiệu affair before the 1968 Election, or even the secret intervention in Cambodia. After that Nixon was really worried and decided to create a group, later called ***The White House Plumbers*** by the media, using illegal means and methods to dig up information for him. This group tried to break in offices where Daniel Ellsberg used to work like the Rand Corporation, or Brookings Institute where Nixon thought might contain files that could hurt him. This episode lets the viewers hear some taped conversations between Nixon and his Chief of Staff, Bob Haldeman as follows: ***“Well, I mean, I want it implemented on a thievery basis. Goddamn it, get in and get those files. Blow the safe and get it.” “Did they get the Brookings Institute raided last night? Bob Haldeman answered “No” “Get it done. I want it done. I want the Brookings Institute safe cleaned out. Bob, get on the Brookings thing right away. I’ve got to get that safe cracked over there.”*** This infamous group was also responsible for the break-in at the Democratic National Committee’s offices (in the Watergate complex) in Washington, D.C., leading to the Watergate Investigation and ultimately resulting in Nixon’s downfall.

Episode 10: “The Weight of Memory” (March 1973 – Onward)

This last episode of ***The Vietnam War*** presents the political events in the U.S., mostly surrounding the Watergate Investigation leading to President’s resignation and the inability to deal with Congress of his successor, President Gerald Ford. Episode 10 also includes footages showing the military deterioration of the ARVN leading to the total collapse and surrender of the GVN on April 30th, 1975. This last episode also depicts events in the aftermath of the GVN’s surrender: re-education, boat people, and, more importantly, the path to normalization of relations between the U.S. and Vietnam.

The Watergate Investigation created the biggest and most serious political crisis in the U.S. and resulted in two events that have never happened in U.S. history. The

first event was the resignation of President Richard Nixon. The second one was the elevation to the Presidency of Gerald Ford, becoming the first President of the United States who was not elected by the American people. Everything has happened in the following unimaginable, unreal scenario: in 1972, the Republican ticket Nixon – Agnew won a landslide victory; on October 10, 1973, Agnew had to resign the Vice-Presidency under investigation of corruption; and Ford, a U.S. Representative from Michigan, was selected by President Nixon to serve as Vice-President. Without a mandate from the American people, Ford was a weak president, probably the weakest president in U.S. history, unable to deal with Congress, and thus had all his requests for military aid for the GVN were rejected by Congress. The ARVN was facing a very serious military situation: fuel and ammunition were limited to the impossible level: ***“Fuel ran low. So did ammunition. Before long, artillerymen in the Central Highlands could fire just four shells a day, and infantrymen were limited to 85 bullets a month.”*** Lt-General Lâm Quang Thi, Commander of the Forward Command of I Corps, in his interview, also confirmed: ***“With one grenade and 85 bullets a month, how could you fight? After you’ve shot all 85 bullets, you can’t fight anymore. Defeat was inevitable.”*** In the meantime, North Vietnam continued to receive unlimited military aid from its allies, China and the Soviet Union. The NVA’s capacity was greatly enhanced as mentioned in the following statement in Episode 10: ***“Hanoi built a new highway within South Vietnam itself, down which convoys of 200 to 300 vehicles soon began streaming: trucks, tanks, and heavy guns moving in broad daylight. And they began laying down a giant oil pipeline to fuel their vehicles in the South.”***

This episode also reveals Nixon’s promise to President Thieu: ***“Nixon has privately promised President Thieu that he would retaliate with American airpower if Saigon ever seemed seriously threatened.”*** Taking over from President Nixon, President Ford was prevented by Congress from taking any actions against North Vietnam’s violations of the Paris Peace Accords. After having captured Phước Long (in III Corps), and Ban Mê Thuột (in II Corps) in blatant violations of the Paris Peace Accords without facing any retaliations from the U.S., North Vietnamese leaders fully realized that their time has come. They decided to use all their forces (just leaving one division to protect the North) to attack South Vietnam, resulting in the surrender of the GVN on April 30th, 1975. The only consolation for the South Vietnamese people was the face-saving battle of the ARVN at Xuân Lộc. The 18th Infantry Division under the command of Brigadier-General Lê Minh Đảo was able to resist the attack of 3, or 4 NVA divisions at Xuân Lộc, blocking their advance toward Saigon. Episode 10 recounts this last heroic big battle of the Vietnam War: ***“Just 40 miles east of Saigon, North Vietnamese forces attacked the town of Xuân Lộc on Highway One, the last obstacle on their way to Saigon. Although they were outnumbered and outgunned, the South Vietnamese commander refused to retreat. He was***

determined to keep the enemy from his capital. The filmmakers included the taped interview of General Đảo in this episode: ***“Reporter: You’re certain that you can hold Xuân Lộc?” General Đảo answered: “Surely, surely. I am certain to you. I am sure with you I can hold Xuân Lộc. Even the enemy uses, you know, the double forces, or maybe three times more than my forces. But no problem, sir. No problem.”***

After their final victory, the North Vietnamese Communists made a big mistake in implementing a narrow, intolerant, and cruel policy toward the South Vietnamese people. This last episode stated very clearly: ***“A million and a half people are believed to have undergone some form of indoctrination. ARVN cemeteries were bulldozed or padlocked, as if the memory of an independent South Vietnam, and those who had died for that cause, could both be obliterated.”*** Mrs Dương Văn Mai Elliot, in her interview, also said: ***“The communists, in their effort to erase vestiges of the former regime, have not allowed the South Vietnamese, who lost their sons in the war, to mourn, to have their graves, and to honor their memory. It caused a division that lasts to this day, that the winners would not accommodate the losers in some way.”*** North Vietnamese Nguyễn Ngọc stated: ***“We’ve become one country, but I would say that: the Vietnamese people have never been more divided than they are now.”***

The remaining part of Episode presents the uneasy path toward the normalization of relations between Vietnam and the U.S., focusing on the contributions by U.S. Vietnam Veterans. The viewers also find in this episode footage on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. The author of this review strongly believes that this footage is the most moving part of the whole documentary. The filmmakers only give a brief account of the issue of the Boat People and the Vietnamese refugees in the U.S.

Conclusion

The two directors use a small part of the last episode to talk about the rectitude of the Vietnam War, through the words of Colonel Stuart A. Herrington, an intelligence officer of the U.S. Army: ***“Maybe it was all a big mistake, and, you know what, what was it all about? We answered the call, me and probably 2 and half million other young Americans who went over there. It was a cause worth the effort. And sometimes, things just don’t turn out and the guys in the white hats don’t win. But that doesn’t make it, uh, or doesn’t basically take away from the rectitude of the cause.”***

I tend to think that the filmmakers were right in their statement: ***“We believe that with perspective comes understanding.”*** It reflects in this very emotional testimonial by Mrs. Nancy Biberman, an antiwar activist: ***“When I look back at the war, you know, think of the horrible things, you know, we said to, you know, vets who were returning, you know, calling them “baby killers” and worse, I, you know, I feel very sad about that. I can only say that, you know, we were kids, too, you know, just like they were. It grieves me, it grieves me today, it pains me to think of the things that I said and that we said. And I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”***

For me, the writer of this review, after having viewed this documentary, especially after having watched the scene in which the U.S. and VC veterans were making peace with each other, I feel deeply sad that, more than 40 years after the end of the war, Vietnamese people inside and outside Vietnam still cannot understand each other. The division and hatred are still there. When can we see the end of these? I sincerely hope that the new generations of Vietnamese, those growing up in Vietnam and those growing up overseas from parents, who have paid a high “price of freedom,”^[17] would be able to overcome these barriers and make peace with each other.

Notes:

1. Phạm Cao Dương. ***Trước khi bão lụt tràn tới: Bảo Đại – Trần Trọng Kim và Đế Quốc Việt Nam, 9/3/1945 – 30/8/1945. (Before the storm: Bao Dai – Tran Trong Kim and the Vietnamese Empire, 9/Mar/1945 – 30/Aug/1945)*** San Bernardino, Calif.: Truyền Thống Việt, 2017. *Chương 3, Hoạt động và thành tích: cứu đói, một việc làm tối khẩn cấp, (Chapter 3, Activities and achievements: saving people from the famine, a most urgent task)* p. 181-204. Dr. Phạm Cao Dương, graduating from University of Saigon, South Vietnam, obtaining a Ph.D. from University of Paris, France, has taught Vietnamese History and Culture at several higher education institutes in Southern California like UCLA, UCI, CSU Fullerton, and CSU Long Beach.
2. Đoàn Thêm. ***Hai mươi năm qua: việc từng ngày (1945-1964) (The past twenty years: chronology (1945-1964))***; tựa của Lăng Nhân (foreword by Lăng Nhân). Los Alamitos, Calif.: Xuân Thu, [1979?]. p. 292
3. Lý Tòng Bá. ***Hồi ký 25 năm khói lửa của một tướng lãnh cầm quân tại mặt trận (25 years of war: memoir of a general commanding troops at the front)***. San Jose, Calif.: Tác giả xuất bản, 1995. p. 65. Mr. Lý Tòng Bá was a Brigadier-General of the ARVN, hero of the Battle of Kontum (Easter Offensive in 1972); his last position was Commanding General of the ARVN 25th Infantry Division; he fought until the last minute when his division was overwhelmed and he was captured by the enemy.
4. Lý Tòng Bá, *ibid*, p. 65, 68, 71, 79, and 80.
5. Đỗ Mậu. ***Việt Nam máu lửa quê hương tôi: hồi-ký chính-trị, bổ-túc hồ-sơ về sự sụp-đổ của Việt-Nam Cộng-Hoa. (Vietnam my country of blood and fire: political memoir documenting the collapse of the Republic of Vietnam)***. Mission Hills, Calif.: Quê Hương, 1986. The Caravelle Manifest, p. 1251-1258. Mr. Đỗ Mậu was a Major-General of the ARVN, and Vice-Premier Responsible for Cultural and Social Affairs in General Nguyen Khanh Government.
6. Lê Xuân Khoa. ***Việt Nam 1945-1995: chiến tranh, tị nạn và bài học lịch sử. Tập 1: Tị nạn 1954 và bài học bốn cuộc chiến (1945-1979). (Vietnam 1945-1995: war, exodus and historical lessons. Volume 1: The 1954 exodus and lessons from 4 wars (1945-1979))***.

- Bethesda, Md.: Tiên Rồng, 2004. p. 434-444. Dr. Lê Xuân Khoa was Vice-Rector, University of Saigon before 1975. He has worked for many years as President of SEARAC (South East Asia Resource Action Center), and Visiting Professor, Johns Hopkins University, Washington, D.C.
7. Trần Ngọc Toàn. “Tiểu Đoàn 4 TQLC với trận Bình Giả (30-12-1964),” (“The 4th Marines Battalion with the Battle of Binh Gia (30-Dec-1964)” trong (In) **Tuyển tập 2: Hai mươi một năm chiến trận của binh chủng Thủy Quân Lục Chiến Việt Nam (1954-1975).** (Selection 2: twenty one years of fighting of the Vietnamese Marines (1954-1975). Santa Ana, Calif: Tổng Hội TQLC/VN Tại Hoa Kỳ (General Association of Vietnamese Marines in the U.S.), 2005. p. 75.
 8. Lâm Vĩnh Thế. **Tìm hiểu thêm về việc Thủy Quân Lục Chiến Hoa Kỳ đổ bộ vào Đà Nẵng ngày 8-3-1965,** (Efforts in finding more information on the landing of US Marines at Danang on 8-Mar-1965), online article, available in full-text at this URL: <https://sites.google.com/site/namkyluctinhong/tac-gia-tac-pham/i-j-k-l-m/lam-vinh-the/tim-hieu-the-m-ve-viec-thuy-quan-luc-chien-hoa-ky-do-bo-vao-dha-nang-ngay-8-3-1965>
 9. Lâm Vĩnh Thế. **Republic of Vietnam, 1963-1967: years of political chaos.** Hamilton, Ont.: Hoài Việt, 2010.
 10. Đoàn Thêm. **1966: việc từng ngày. (1966: Chronology).** Los Alamitos, Calif.: Xuân Thu, 1989. p. 241-248.
 11. Đoàn Thêm. **1967: việc từng ngày. (1967: Chronology).** Los Alamitos, Calif.: Xuân Thu, 1989. p. 309-313.
 12. **The Story behind the famous “Saigon execution” photo,** online article, available in full-text at this URL: <https://cherrieswriter.wordpress.com/2015/08/03/the-story-behind-the-famous-saigon-execution-photo/>
 13. Lâm Vĩnh Thế. **Tổng Thống Nguyễn Văn Thiệu và Hòa Đàm Paris (President Nguyen Van Thieu and the Paris Peace Talks),** online article, available in full-text at this URL: <https://sites.google.com/site/namkyluctinhong/tac-gia-tac-pham/i-j-k-l-m/lam-vinh-the/tong-thong-nguyen-van-thieu-va-hoa-dham-paris>
 14. Nguyễn Kỳ Phong. **Đường về Tchepone: Hành Quân Lam Sơn 719 (On the way to Tchepone: Operation Lam Son 719).** Garden Grove, Calif.: Tự Lực, 2013. Chương 9: Nhận định về LS 719 (Chapter 9: Remarks on LS 719), p. [185]-195.
 15. Nguyễn Duy Hinh. **Lam Son 719.** Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1979. (Indochina monographs). Mr. Nguyễn Duy Hinh was a Major-General of the ARVN, Chief of Staff for Lt.-General Ngô Quang Trưởng, then Commanding General of the ARVN 3rd Infantry Division that he successfully rebuild and turned it into one of the best infantry divisions of the ARVN.
 16. Ngô Văn Định. “Tái chiếm Cổ Thành Quảng Trị ngày 15-9-72,” (Recapturing Quang Tri Old Citadel on September 15th 1972) trong (In) **Tuyển tập 2: Hai mươi một năm chiến trận của binh chủng Thủy Quân Lục Chiến Việt Nam (1954-1975).** (Selection 2: twenty one years of fighting of the Vietnamese Marines Corps (1954-1975). Santa Ana, Calif: Tổng Hội TQLC/VN Tại Hoa Kỳ (General Association of Vietnamese Marines in the US), 2005. p. 402. Mr. Ngô Văn Định was a graduate of the 4th Class of Da Lat National Military Academy, was a Colonel, Commander of the 258 Brigade (1971-94), and later Commander of the 468 Brigade (1975) of the Vietnamese Marines Division.
 17. Lâm Vĩnh Bình. **The Price of freedom: exodus and diaspora of Vietnamese people;** translated by Vinh-The Lam. Westminster, Calif.: Nguoi Viet Books, 2017. 468 p.