PBS’ ‘Vietnam War’ Tells Some Truths

Exclusive: The PBS 10-part Vietnam War series offers valuable insights into the horrific conflict but still treads lightly on U.S. leaders’ guilt as they lied and connived to start and extend the slaughter, as war correspondent Don North describes.

By Don North (Correction: An earlier version incorrectly stated that the PBS series did not address the issue of Nixon’s sabotage of Johnson’s 1968 peace talks. The topic is mentioned.)

Vietnamese-American author Viet Thanh Nguyen observed in his 2016 book, Nothing Ever Dies, that “All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory.” That is surely true of the Vietnam War, which – although it ended four decades ago – continues as a battle of memory, history and truth.

And, the stakes are still high since honest narratives about important past events can shape the future, even national destinies, and – perhaps most importantly – whether there will be more wars or possibly peace.

When PBS announced that it was broadcasting a 10-part, 18-hour series, entitled “The Vietnam War,” I wasn’t sure what to expect. As a network news correspondent who covered the war for five years through many of its bloodiest chapters, I have had mixed feelings about some of the other attempts to recount and explain the war.

Many of the previous efforts were colored by the political pressures of the moment, especially from policymakers and journalists who had career stakes in how assessments of the failed war would make them look. So, with some trepidation, I watched the entire 10-part series and read the companion book by writer Geoffrey C. Ward over the past week. To my pleasant surprise, I found many reasons to applaud the effort and my criticisms were relatively minor.

In my view, the PBS series, directed by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, represents the most honest and thorough account available to the general public. Over those 18 hours, the series reveals so much duplicity and mendacity that this real history makes even the most cynical movies about the war, such as “Apocalypse Now,” and “The Deer Hunter,” look tame by comparison.

I think that all Americans and Vietnamese who experienced the years of that war will find watching the series at least an educational experience, at best an inspiring one, and for some of us – who witnessed, fought or protested the war –
a profoundly emotional experience as well. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has recognized the series may bring up such stressful memories for combat veterans that it has offered a crisis line for counseling at 1-800-273-8255.

A Clear Narrative

The cement that holds together the interviews of some 80 participants is a clear narration written by Ward and performed by Peter Coyote without the “voice of God” style used in so many documentaries. Ward’s prologue to the first program is a sort of mission statement for the series, which I would criticize mostly because it still contains a residue of the longstanding desire to put a well-meaning gloss on the war’s justifications even when the evidence points elsewhere:

“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 miscalculation. And it was prolonged because it seemed easier to muddle through than to admit it had been caused by tragic decisions, made by five American presidents, belonging to both political parties … For those Americans who fought in it, and for those who fought against it back home – as well we those who merely glimpsed it on the nightly news – the Vietnam War was a decade of agony, the most divisive period since the Civil War.”

Yet, when you hear some of the secret telephone recordings of White House conversations by President Lyndon Johnson, Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara, President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, you’re not left with the impression that there was so much “good faith” by “decent people.”

For instance, one phone conversation between Johnson and National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy reflected how Johnson really felt about Vietnam, contrary to the optimistic assessments that he was selling to the public and belying his assurances that the blood and treasure were worth the cost.

Johnson: I don’t know what in hell … it looks like we’re getting into another Korea. I don’t think it’s worth fighting for and I don’t think we can get out. And it’s just the biggest damn mess.

Bundy: It is an awful mess.

Johnson: What in hell is Vietnam worth to me? What is it worth to the country?

Past the Talking Points
The PBS series interviews some 80 people on camera, including about 20 Vietnamese from both North and South. Drawing heavily from writers and poets, the series presents intelligent thoughts from all sides of the conflict. Novick, who is reported to have conducted most of the interviews, succeeded in getting people to go beyond the usual talking points.

When I returned to Vietnam shortly after the war to interview Vietnamese participants, there was always a government “minder” present. The results were hours of hearing Communist party dogma of little news value. That control seems to have broken down.

Foremost among the Vietnamese interviewed in the PBS series is Bao Ninh, a former North Vietnamese soldier and author of *The Sorrow of War*, a brutal and emotional novel about the war in the jungle and his bitter re-entry into society.

Bao remembers, “At the recruiting station they had singers and poets, working up the spirit of those signing up. There were two types of people – those full of anti-American spirit. And those like me. We were told to go and went.” Of 500 recruits in his brigade sent to fight in the South in 1969, he is one of ten who survived.

Duong Van Mai, now Duong Van Mai Elliot, was the daughter of a high official in the French colonial administration in Hanoi before fleeing south with her family after North and South were split. Mai later studied at Georgetown University and became an American. She is author of *Sacred Willows: Four Generations of a Vietnamese Family*.

One of the most articulate and compelling American witnesses is former U.S. Marine John Musgrave, so badly wounded in Vietnam that doctors rated him as expected to die. We follow Musgrave from his early training through battle, dropping out, alcoholism and war protesting, a veteran who still struggles with effects of his wounds.

Another Marine, Roger Harris, who pops up in almost every program, served in the deadly Con Thien base adjacent to the Demilitarized Zone. Harris recalls: “You go over there with one mind-set and then you adapt. You adapt to the atrocities of war. You adapt to the killing and dying, whatever. … When I first arrived I questioned some of the Marines. I was made to realize this is war – and this is what we do.”

Karl Marlantis, a Rhodes scholar at Oxford, dropped out of school to join the U.S. Marines and led a platoon near the DMZ. Marlantis wrote *Matterhorn*, a Vietnam War classic. His frequent interview segments are articulate and
thoughtful as when he discusses his anger: “I can understand policy errors that kill a lot of people by mistake, but my bitterness is with the lying. Robert McNamara knew by 1965 the war was unwinnable and covering up killing people for your own ego and that’s what makes me mad.”

Secretary of Defense McNamara is often portrayed as a villain, but a very poignant interview is included with McNamara’s son Craig who recalls his appeal to his father to provide him with information for a college debate supporting the war. He never receives it and concludes his father didn’t believe in it himself.

**Lack of Accountability**

Tim O’Brien, another writer and author of *The Things They Carried*, served in the U.S. Army’s Americal Division and was familiar with the village the troops called “Pinkville,” which became the scene of a massacre of Vietnamese civilians at My Lai. O’Brien is critical that no soldiers involved in the massacre were ever sent to prison.

Lt. Commander Everett Alvarez, flying from the carrier USS Constellation, was the first American pilot to be shot down over North Vietnam and the first POW.

“When we approached the target coming down from altitude,” recalled Alvarez, “it was obvious they could pick us up on their radar. I was a bit scared. But once we went in and they started firing at us, the fear went away. My plane, an A-4 Skyhawk, was like a ballet in the sky, and I was just performing. And then I got hit.”

Alvarez spent eight years as a POW in the infamous “Hanoi Hilton.” In 1990 on a visit to Hanoi, I found that ironically a new Hilton Hotel had been built over what remained of the prison. Walking into the hotel bar, I was hailed by a middle-age man sitting on a barstool.

“Hey, you’re an American aren’t you?” he said. “Let me buy you a drink. I’m sitting over what used to be my prison cell for eight years.”

The anti-war movement merits substantial time throughout the series and features many articulate protesters. Bill Zimmerman carries the protesters narrative from 1963 when he was a senior at the University of Chicago and member of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) working for civil rights in Mississippi.

“We had watched the civil rights movement in the South to stand up against injustice, allow yourself to be beaten up or hit by a policeman,” he recalled. “Then one day we saw on TV a picture of a burning monk in Saigon. I asked myself
what were we doing in Vietnam. Ending the war in Vietnam became my constant pre-occupation.”

The anti-war movement is not always portrayed in a favorable light, particularly in later years when bombings occurred and violent demonstrations became frequent. The hostility of many Americans toward the protesters is also captured in an interview with Jan Howard of Tennessee who describes her reaction to a student demonstrator asking her if she would join an anti-war march:

“I said ... my son is dead. One of the reasons he died was so you’d have the right to do this, so go ahead and demonstrate. Have at it. No, I won’t be joining you. But I tell you what, if you ever ring my doorbell again I’ll blow your damned head off with a .357 Magnum.”

Upsetting Hanoi

The series succeeds in cutting through the fog of the often secretive North Vietnamese leadership. Although the series includes interesting footage and photos of Ho Chi Minh, considered the father of modern Vietnam, and General Vo Nguyen Giap, the hero of Dien Bien Phu, the battle which effectively ended French colonial rule, the real power later shifted to Le Duan, a hard-line Communist of the Politburo and mastermind of the Tet offensive.

Newsweek reports that powerful figures in the Hanoi government are not happy with the series to such an extent that they ousted foreign ministry press officers who helped Burns and Novick set up interviews. The leaders’ primary complaint is reported to be that the series exposed the dissension and rivalries throughout the war at the top levels of the Hanoi regime.

They are also annoyed that several Vietnamese who were interviewed spoke frankly about the massacre of civilians in Hue during the Tet offensive. In the past, the North Vietnamese blamed the deaths on American bombs and artillery. (Although PBS devoted considerable time and expense to create a Vietnamese-language version of the series, no one expects the government to allow it to be shown in Vietnam.)

Despite how ambitious the 18-hour series is, there were a few subjects and individuals conspicuous by their absence. For instance, you see Colonel Edward Lansdale meeting with South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem in Saigon but no mention of Lansdale’s years running a psy-war program against the North Vietnamese.

Also, missing is a thorough examination of Nixon’s decision to have 30,000 American soldiers and 50,000 South Vietnamese troops storm across the Cambodian border in April 1970, an invasion that contributed to the Khmer Rouge’s
overthrow of the Cambodian government and the unleashing of one more Vietnam War-related tragedy, the deaths of as many as two million Cambodians from 1975 to 1979. Nixon’s decision to expand the war merited only 2 minutes and 50 seconds in episode six.

But even in an 18-hour series, editorial judgments must be made about what works toward telling the necessary narrative and what doesn’t make the cut (though I would disagree with some of those choices). I also found it confusing when Burns succumbed to some film school techniques, such as “foreshadowing” in episode one entitled “Déjà Vu” that juxtaposed black-and-white archival footage of the failed French colonial occupation of Vietnam with later color film of American troops on patrol.

But a powerful element of the series is the impact of photographs and film from both sides of the conflict. Most film in Vietnam was shot silent, so the sound of bombs and gunshots was mixed in along with popular music. Vietnam, after all, was the first war fought to a rock ‘n roll beat. [Full disclosure: I provided some photographs for the series.]

There is no identification of the photographers who at great risk took many of the photos. Apparently, the producers thought jamming the screen with constant credits for photos and film would be distracting. But the classic photos, many of which have become icons of the war, are readily recognized as the work of Horst Faas, Larry Burrows, Eddie Adams, Tim Page, Don McCullin, Henri Huet and Nick Ut, among many others.

The war claimed the lives of 135 photojournalists. A special tribute to Vietnam photojournalists is included in the closing credits.

Publicity Campaign

For the past month, directors Burns and Novick have spearheaded a massive publicity campaign to promote the series. Last week, the Kennedy Center Opera House was filled for an advance screening of program highlights followed by a panel discussion. Before the screening, Burns asked anyone who served in the military during the war to stand and be recognized with applause. He then asked anyone who protested Vietnam to stand. At that point, two of the war’s most famous veterans, Sen. John McCain and former Secretary of State John Kerry, joined in applauding the anti-war demonstrators, too.

It was a moment that set the tone of reconciliation and harmony the series producers said they had hoped for in documenting one of the most divisive chapters in American history. In the ensuing panel discussion, the 81-year-old McCain, who was a bomber pilot shot down over Hanoi and held as a POW for more
than five years, said, “Maybe we can look back on Vietnam and make sure we don’t make the same mistakes again. We can learn lessons today because the world is in such turmoil: Tell the American people the truth!”

Winston Churchill once said, “The longer you look back, the farther you can look forward.” That would surely be true for any careful study of the Vietnam War, an unwinnable war fought against a country that Americans knew virtually nothing about and in which the U.S. had no vital interests. It was a lesson in how arrogance, ignorance, ideology and political cowardice can be a deadly mix.

The war took the lives of more than 58,000 American soldiers. Although Vietnamese casualty estimates vary widely, the Vietnamese government tallied more than 1 million soldiers dead along with 2 million civilians.

In 2001, I interviewed historian Arthur Schlesinger at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba and asked him if we were learning from our history. “History is an argument without end,” Schlesinger told me. “No historian would use the word definitive because new times bring new preoccupations and we historians realize we are prisoners of our own experience. As Oscar Wilde used to say ‘One duty we owe to history is to re-write it.’”

As upsetting as the Vietnam War series may be, it holds out hope that we might still learn from history.

Don North is a veteran war correspondent who covered the Vietnam War and many other conflicts around the world. He is the author of Inappropriate Conduct, the story of a World War II correspondent whose career was crushed by the intrigue he uncovered.