



DOCUMENTING THE VIETNAM WAR

A Conversation with Lynn Novick

INTERVIEW BY CARLA WALKER



Detail, program poster, *The Vietnam War*, a film by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick. Interview images courtesy PBS

“It’s going to make you uncomfortable.”

Lynn Novick is co-director, co-producer, and long-time creative collaborator with filmmaker Ken Burns. *The Vietnam War* is the newest of their award-winning documentaries, a 10-part, 18-hour odyssey into the multilayered conflict Americans know as “Vietnam.”

“It’s going to make you uncomfortable,” says Novick, “but hopefully, after watching the series, you’ll have a deeper understanding of a difficult, traumatic time in history.”

In early 1960s Vietnam, hostilities had deep roots, pitting citizens against outside aggressors and internal power struggles. Third-party insurgents complicated the clash between a North Vietnamese mandate for communist reunification and the South Vietnamese desire to remain an independent state. Add to that rivalry, military intervention from the United States, China, and the Soviet Union and the scope of a documentary on the Vietnam War becomes vast, taking a decade to complete. Novick made three trips to Vietnam during filming, staying an average of three weeks per visit to interview veterans and Vietnamese civilians whose lives were forever changed by what they call “the American War.”

In the United States, anti-communism protectionists faced opposition from antiwar protesters and conscientious objectors, each sector acting on heartfelt patriotism. An anti-establishment counterculture coincided with movements for civil rights and women’s equality—tensions that were reflected in an explosion of music, film, poetry, visual art, and changing views on sexuality, public policy, and environmentalism. The Novick-Burns documentary endeavors to capture all these narratives, showing that, for Americans, “Vietnam” was more than a war in far off Southeast Asia—it was an era of change.

The Vietnam War premieres September 17 on PBS and includes interviews with approximately 100 witnesses—for and against the war—as well as scholar commentary on the people and events that shaped world history and American culture. In the following conversation, Novick discusses the diverse perspectives captured in the film and the crew’s discoveries along the way, insight that is sure to enhance your appreciation of this unforgettable documentary.



North Vietnamese Army soldiers during Operation Lam Son 719, Laos 1971. Nguyen Dinh Uu, Doug Niven



A soldier burning down a hut in My Lai village. Photo by Ron Haberle. National Archives



Mass funeral for S. Vietnamese killed by Viet Cong during Tet Offensive, Oct. 1969. Bettmann, Getty Images



Young N. Vietnamese join the Youth Shock Brigades Against the Americans for National Salvation. Vietnam News Agency



Vietnamese Rangers rush children to a waiting helicopter northwest of Saigon, April 1974. Associated Press, The Horst Faas Estate, Michael Ebert, Magdeburg, Germany



Girl killed in the May Offensive (Mini-Tet), Saigon, 1968. Philip Jones Griffith, Magnum Photos



South Vietnamese soldier comforts wounded comrade near Saigon, Aug. 5, 1963. Horst Faas, Associated Press



Suspected Viet Cong soldier carrying a Russian-made rifle, awaiting interrogation, Aug. 25, 1965. Associated Press



Vietnamese farmer detained for questioning, 1967. Philip Jones Griffiths, Magnum Photos



Marines carrying their wounded during firefight near the DMZ, 1966. Larry Burrows, Getty Images

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CARLA WALKER: Lynn, thank you for this opportunity to talk about this extraordinary documentary. The press preview was only a fraction of the film, but very impressive. There is so much to the story, it is no wonder that it took ten years to put together. Do you have a personal connection to the war? Do you recall it in your childhood?

LYNN NOVICK: Yes. I am in my 50s, Ken Burns is in his mid-60s, Sara Botstein our producer is in her mid-40s, and Jeff Ward our writer is in his mid-70s. So we each represent a different decade in age and therefore a different perspective about the war.

As I was growing up it was something that my parents talked about a lot and were very upset about. I don't remember a time when the Vietnam War wasn't happening in my childhood. I certainly did not understand why it was happening, why we were there. And then it ended and we stopped talking about it. It was like it never happened, it just went away. That seemed very strange to me.

I came to understand that it's the most important event in American history since the Second World War, but also one of the least well understood. It's been an obsession for me for most of my adult life, trying to make sense of it, understand what happened, why it was so divisive, and why it remains divisive to this day.

What are some of the particulars of that divisiveness that you look at in the film?

We try to tell the story of the war in chronological order, from the origins of the French conquest of Indochina in 1858 up until today. We didn't set out to investigate the divisive aspects of the war, but rather to find out what happened, to see it from as many different perspectives as we possibly could, both American perspectives and

Vietnamese perspectives. We tried to look at this from every possible angle to understand why people disagree about it so vehemently. We were surprised to discover that the war remains as unsettled and divisive among Vietnamese as it is for Americans.

Do the Vietnamese talk about it?

No, in much the same way that we don't talk about it. In the beginning of the film, a North Vietnamese veteran says, "We don't talk about the war. We veterans don't like to talk about it." And then he goes on to say that he thinks it's a waste of time to argue about who won and who lost because the bigger question is that war is terrible. That, to us, elevates a different kind of conversation about the effects of war on people. It's a very sensitive subject among Vietnamese, for a variety of reasons that we learned about in making the film.

Do they think about it as a civil war, within their country, and then Americans came along and interfered?

That's a great question. Some people in Vietnam would say it's a civil war that tore families and the country apart. Some people would say it was a war to liberate their country from foreign domination. And some people would say it was a war of communists taking over an independent democratic country. There's no one Vietnamese perspective.

How much time did you spend in Vietnam in the course of research and filming?

I went to Vietnam three times, each time for about three weeks, over several years. It was an incredible privilege to go there and meet so many people. For every one you see on camera, we met many more. Sara Botstein and I led the effort to go to Vietnam and find people to interview to understand the war from

as many Vietnamese perspectives as possible. And the more we talked to people, the more we understood how complicated it is there.

For many people, there is tremendous pride that a small country managed to defeat this large and powerful country. And yet there's also an enormous amount of soul-searching about the true cost of the war: "It was important to unify the country, but did we get what we were promised? Was there any other way that it could have been accomplished? India achieved independence from Great Britain without a war. Was a war necessary? And was it just?" These are big questions that many people in Vietnam are asking.

They have a different name for the war, don't they?

Some people call it the American War, but there's a propagandistic name—the Resistance War Against America. There are many people in Vietnam who think about it as one war that lasted thirty years, from 1945 to 1975, fighting the French and then fighting the Americans *and* fighting each other.

As an American, I can't imagine living through generations of conflict and occupation. Liberation must have been so important to the Vietnamese.

In our film we have a number of American veterans who make parallels between American independence from Great Britain, which was unconventional warfare at that time, not playing by the rules, being the weaker power trying to outlast the stronger power. That's essentially how the communist-led North Vietnamese and Viet Cong approached the war against us. It's interesting the number of American veterans that bring that up, hypothetically wondering:



Military police block antiwar demonstrators at the Pentagon, Oct. 26, 1967. *The Washington Post*, Getty Images



Civilians huddle together after an attack by South Vietnamese forces, Dong Xoai, June 1965. Horst Faas, Associated Press



Marines marching in Da Nang, March 15, 1965. Associated Press



173rd Airborne Brigade paratrooper after an early morning firefight, July 14, 1966. John Nance, Associated Press

How much was it like our quest for independence?

One of the things that Ken and I come to, again and again, is that the Vietnam War raises many, many questions—and a lot of them are unanswerable. We ask the questions with more information and more perspective, and hope to engage the country in a civil discourse about the questions that the war raises.

In one of the interviews I read, you remarked that working on the film was a constant exercise in compassion. Would you talk about that?

Yes, one of the great privileges of this film for me was conducting most of the interviews—and I know Ken feels the same way, and Sara Botstein, who also did a number of interviews. We're asking people to share some of the most difficult

memories and revealing moments of their lives. Sometimes it's easier to talk about these things with someone you don't know, because it's difficult to churn up these feelings and describe things that are so distressing. For us, to sit down with people who have painful stories to tell and just create a space where they feel it's okay—you're not going to judge, you're just going to give them your full attention and listen with an open mind and an open heart, to have compassion for them no matter who they are or what happened to them—was essential to getting this story. That was our central motivation, that we would tell this enormously painful tragedy through the eyes of the people who lived through it. And, yeah, you have to have compassion to do that.

In your interviews with Vietnamese and American veterans, did you get a sense of whether there is a path to reconciliation?

This is a great question. One of the many things that Ken and I learned in the course of putting this film together is that it's impossible to have true reconciliation unless you have moved toward understanding the truth first. There are many truths in something as complicated and messy as the Vietnam War, but one of the truths is there is an enormous amount of suffering on all sides.

If we as Americans can appreciate and accept that there's humanity and inhumanity in us, that there's humanity and inhumanity on all sides, *that*, I think, is a truth of this war that is important. A number of American veterans we've talked to have gone back to Vietnam and

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tried to meet with North Vietnamese soldiers or Viet Cong guerrillas and connect with them on a human level. They have found some peace in that and have been able to let go of some of the weight, the psychic weight they've been carrying. There is a possibility of reconciliation on a basic human level, one to one.

The American government and the Vietnam government have normalized relations. The real reconciliation, the real work that needs to happen is among Americans and among Vietnamese. That has not happened, either there or here. The rancor and bitterness and resentment over the war and whose fault it was, and the toll it took on our civil society, we're still fighting that war in some ways. I don't think we're very close to reconciliation at all.

I found sections of the film difficult to watch. I'll admit to crying.

If you don't cry when you're thinking about this story, you don't have a heart. It's a very painful story. If we want to find reconciliation and peace, we have to give vent, allow those feelings, whatever they might be—sadness, regret, remorse. It's impossible to think about it without crying.

It's also impossible to think about it without respect for the heroism and bravery and self-sacrifice of our soldiers who went so far above and beyond in a cause that was in dispute. I cannot even imagine how difficult that was, especially later, as the war became more unpopular and the wreckage of the war was called into question. Those soldiers still went to Vietnam and fought and died and sacrificed for each other and we have to remember that.

Did the historical research of the era give you a sense of why Americans felt the need to protect the world against communism? Was it just our fear of "the other"?

No, there was a legitimate and very real fear. Communism seemed to be gaining strength in the world after World War II. The Soviet Union had taken over a large swath of Europe, a lot of territory the Germans had previously conquered, and they weren't giving it up. They were basically reshaping those countries to be satellites. And in Asia, China became a communist country and was trying to foment revolution in other places. There was a real concern that democracies were under threat.

Layered on top of that, you have the nuclear age: China has nuclear weapons, Russia has nuclear weapons, and we have nuclear weapons. Three superpowers have the fate of the world in their hands. These are simultaneous, parallel, interconnected threats our leaders were consciously and thoughtfully trying to balance—how to have stability in the world, how to have safety in the nuclear age. The stakes in Vietnam seemed very high.

We were trying to avoid nuclear war by going to war in Vietnam. It was a way, in the 50s and early 60s, of showing the communists that we meant business and were not to be trifled with. I'm grossly oversimplifying a very complex geopolitical strategy, but we do try in the film to explain the context of the war and how it started. You see, over the course of ten episodes and eighteen hours, the rationale and the perceived necessity. The justification for the war evolves over time and that's partly why it gets so unpopular, because the reasons why we're there evolve.

I want to ask you about the organization that supports our common work, the National Endowment for the Humanities. NEH supports much of the programming that we do in Oklahoma, and I know it has awarded grants to many of your films. Tell us about the role of those federal dollars in a project like your film on the Vietnam War.

It is a great privilege to work with the Endowment. The process of creating the grant proposal holds our feet to the fire, elevates our own discourse as we try to explain to ourselves, before we can explain to the Endowment: Why are we making this film? What is its purpose? How can it advance our shared understanding of the humanities?

And every project is different. Baseball, jazz, the Second World War, prohibition, each film has its own connections to the humanities. We would employ scholars to help us on our films whether we had an NEH grant or not; but it's been incredibly collaborative to work with the Endowment over the years. They've introduced us to many, many scholars who've been incredibly helpful and thoughtful. It has been really instructive to understand the care and thought that goes into choosing grant recipients and then working with them to develop projects so they will fulfill the mandate of the Endowment. To me, the National Endowment for the Humanities represents the best of scholarship. Having their support holds us to a high standard and we're very grateful for that.

Thank you for your insight, Lynn, and for taking on this project to help us understand the Vietnam War. We're going to learn so much from it.

LYNN NOVICK is an Emmy and Peabody Award-winning documentary filmmaker with 30 years' experience in producing and directing documentary films about American history and culture—some of the most acclaimed to air on PBS, including: *Prohibition*, *Baseball*, *Jazz*, and *The War*, a 15-hour exploration of World War II. *The Vietnam War* is directed by Lynn Novick and Ken Burns, co-produced by Novick, Burns, and Sarah Botstein, and written by Geoffrey C. Ward.