

'THE VIETNAM WAR' DOCUMENTARY

DOCUMENTING DESTRUCTION

It was 30 years before the time felt right for these filmmakers to explore the Vietnam War, and it took another decade to do it properly

F4 Phantom jets rain bombs on unspecified targets over North Vietnam in December 1965. This photo was taken prior to the halt of airstrikes on Dec. 24, 1965. The Air Force and Navy sent planes against two targets in North Vietnam on Jan. 31, 1966, ending the lull that began on Christmas Eve.

PROVIDED BY THE U.S. AIR FORCE/ASSOCIATED PRESS; JASPER COLT/USA TODAY

By Matt Alderton

FOR AMERICANS WHO GREW up learning social studies, watching *Jeopardy!* and playing Trivial Pursuit, history is supposed to be about answering questions. For documentary filmmakers Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, however, the point of history has always been to ask them.

That's especially true with respect to their latest film series, *The Vietnam War*,

which premiered in September on PBS. Barely a minute into the first episode, Vietnam War veteran Karl Marlantes articulates the burning question to which Burns and Novick have devoted 10 episodes and 18 hours.

"For years, nobody talked about Vietnam," said Marlantes, a former Marine Corps officer. "It was so divisive. It's like living in a family with an alcoholic father: 'Shhhh! We don't talk about that.' Our country did that with Vietnam, and it's



only been very recently that the baby boomers are finally starting to say, 'What happened? What happened?'"

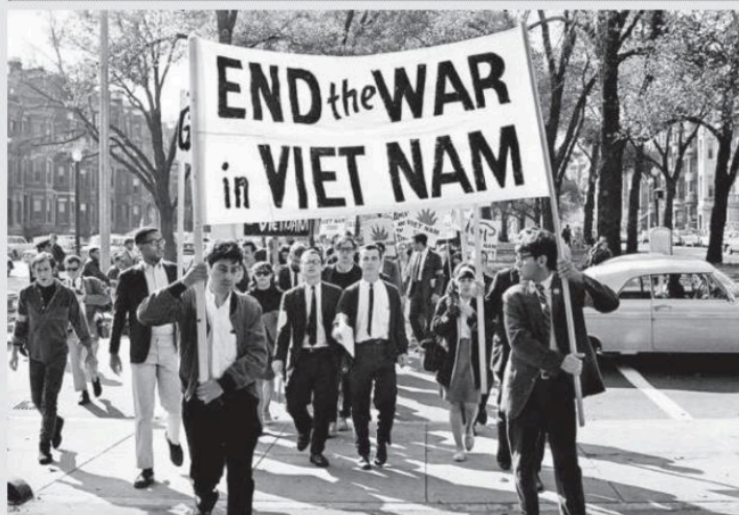
Because there has never been a consensus answer, Burns and Novick spent the past decade asking it of witnesses and historians. The resulting piece of cinematic scholarship is not only a monument to art and history, but also a testament to the hard work that is filmmaking. "We don't have an agenda; we're just umpires calling balls and strikes," Burns said.

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South Vietnamese Gen. Nguyen Ngoc Loan, chief of the national police, executes Nguyen Van Lem on a Saigon street Feb. 1, 1968, early in the Tet Offensive. Lem, the captain of a terrorist squad, had just killed the family of one of Loan's friends. "If you hesitate, if you didn't do your duty, the men won't follow you," Loan said.

Photographer
Eddie Adams/
Associated Press



Several hundred people, including students from Boston University, Harvard, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology, march down Commonwealth Avenue in Boston on Oct. 16, 1965, to attend a rally on Boston Common protesting the United States' involvement in Vietnam.

Photographer
Frank C. Curtin/
Associated Press

THE RIGHT TIME

Of course, Burns has made war documentaries before: 1990's *The Civil War* and 2007's *The War*, about World War II on the homefront. This time, however, there's a personal connection, as Burns experienced the Vietnam era as an adolescent in Ann Arbor, Mich., where his father taught at the University of Michigan.

"I didn't go to the University of Michigan, but the campus there was a hotbed for anti-war demonstrations and unrest," said

Burns, who co-directed *The Vietnam War* with Novick and co-produced it with her and longtime collaborator Sarah Botstein. "One of the war's first teach-ins occurred in the anthropology department there in 1965. My father worked in that department ... so I was very much aware of the war and followed it closely."

Although Burns was not drafted — he turned 18 in 1971, two years before the draft ended — the war still left a deep and lasting impression. So much so that he has

long wanted to make a film about Vietnam. Because the wounds were so fresh, however, the timing never seemed right.

"We've been talking about doing something with Vietnam for as long as I've known Ken," Novick said. "The Vietnam War was the most important event in American history since World War II. So being as interested as we are in American history, we felt we had to go there at some point. But when Ken and I started working together in the late '80s, the war was still

"This was a very traumatic, difficult and painful moment in American history, and we as a country have never really dealt with it."

— Lynn Novick,
filmmaker

relatively recent. We wanted to wait for more time to pass."

In 2006, as they were finishing *The War* documentary television mini-series, they decided the time was finally right. It had been three decades since Vietnam ended.

"Since the fall of Saigon, we have gained massive new scholarship and the ability through our contacts to access Vietnam — including not only the physical country, but also its archives and, most importantly, its human beings," said Burns, who began shooting the film in 2010, after four years of preproduction. "That made now an ideal time to make this film."

Timing is one reason Burns and Novick tackled the Vietnam War. Patriotism is another.

"This was a very traumatic, difficult and painful moment in American history, and we as a country have never really dealt with it," Novick said. "Our hope was that we could delve into it, try to understand it, put the pieces together in an organized way and perhaps help our country talk about something it really needs to talk about."

FINDING FACTS

Because *The Vietnam War* is equal in length to 10 feature films, putting the pieces together to weave it into a compelling story was a herculean effort, Novick said.

"A film like this requires an enormous amount of research," said Novick, whose team of about 30 reviewed approximately 100,000 still photographs, thousands of hours of video footage, 1,000 musical tracks, countless sound effects and hours of presidential audio recordings.

"We have a team of producers, associate producers and researchers that spent six years combing archives around the world, building relationships with individual photographers, people who lived through this experience and have their own personal collections, archivists at presidential libraries, and archivists at the world's most respected photo houses and commercial

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On a hillside in South Vietnam's Long Khanh Province (now Dong Nai), Army Spc. Ruediger Richter, left, and Sgt. Daniel Spencer wait for a helicopter to retrieve the body of Pfc. Daryl Raymond Corfman. Smoke from a grenade that Richter threw shrouds the background.

Photographer
Pfc. Paul Epley/
Army paratrooper



Under sniper fire, a Vietnamese woman carries a child to safety as U.S. Marines storm the village of My Son, near Danang, as they search for Viet Cong insurgents in April 1965.

Photographer
Eddie Adams/
Associated Press



news organizations so we could have access to all that raw material, which then had to be thoughtfully collected, organized, cataloged, labeled and tagged so we could find it and ultimately license it if we needed."

Then there were interviews with veterans and witnesses: Their personal contacts referred more than 1,000 people to the film's producers, who ultimately interviewed 100 of them on camera — 79 of them made it into the film.

"Just finding the people and figuring out who to talk to took us the better part of two years," Novick said.

The intensive research extended to writer Geoffrey C. Ward, who said he used

1,000 books as source material for the script and for *The Vietnam War: An Intimate History*, a companion book co-authored with Burns.

Archival materials and interview subjects came from both the United States and Vietnam, where producers got perspectives from North and South Vietnamese that only recently became available to American scholars.

"This is a war, which means there's two sides," said Burns, who also interviewed Vietnamese soldiers and civilians, and even former Viet Cong guerrillas, in pursuit of a holistic story that stands in stark contrast to Hollywood portrayals of the Vietnam War in films like *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*

and *Born on the Fourth of July*. "It's really important not to demonize the enemy and turn them into faceless things. ... We've got a complicated story to tell, and presenting different points of view allows us to paint a more complete picture."

The Vietnam War argues neither in favor of the war nor against it. Thanks to an advisory panel of veterans and historians, it's an objective look at history.

"Because we've created a space in which all these disparate points of view can coexist, it doesn't matter what your politics are. ... This film is for everybody and will hopefully remind us all to have the kind of civil discourse that we've forgotten how to have."



BY THE NUMBERS

The *Vietnam War* film series took **10 years to produce**. It consists of **10 episodes** totaling **18 hours**. It's scheduled to be broadcast in 35 additional countries this fall.

DOCUMENTATION

The production team reviewed archival materials (photos, footage and audio recordings) from **13 countries**.

The film includes **2,000 photos** and **seven hours of archival footage**.

INTERVIEWS

More than **1,000 witnesses** in the United States and Vietnam were interviewed.

79 interviews are shown throughout the series; 29 interviewees are Vietnamese or Vietnamese-American.

SOUNDTRACK

Nearly **120 songs** from the Vietnam era are featured.

ORIGINAL MUSIC

Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross composed and recorded **17 original themes**.

Yo-Yo Ma and The Silk Road Ensemble recorded **15 songs or themes**.

Compiled by Florentine Films