

500 Words or Less Reviews: Ken Burns' The Vietnam War

Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's 10-part documentary "The Vietnam War", highlighting the U.S. involvement in Vietnam through the mid-50s to mid-70s, is a profoundly well-made one. Nevertheless, some who lived during these times have criticized the two for skewing the material in various ways.

On the other hand, the miniseries has the approval of the nationally respected organization, Vietnam Veterans of America. In his review on behalf of the VVA, Marc Leepson, states they feared the worst of the miniseries, the making of which they were never consulted. But he says they were largely delighted with the well-presented production that lays out an accurate, balanced depiction of the events (You can view Leepson's review [here](#).)

The documentary begins things in 1898 at the beginning of the Vietnamese struggle against French colonialism, the French would lose control to the Japanese during World War II, followed by a failed attempt by France to take it back after the war.

The now independent Vietnam became steeped in a bitter civil war between communist northern Vietnam and increasingly politically corrupt southern Vietnam. In the U.S. fight against all faces of communism, the U.S. sided with South Vietnam. The nearly 20-year U.S. involvement in Vietnam was done under the authorization of five U.S. presidents and a host of other politicians who carried it out with a combination of pride, political ambition, and misunderstanding of the Vietnamese people. The official start date for our involvement is said to be 1955. After the U.S. fighting forces finally left in 1973, the now dependent South Vietnamese army was left to defend itself and failed miserably.

The 10-part, 17.5-hour miniseries is told via video clips; historic sound recordings; snapshots; the narration of Peter Coyote; and the first-hand commentary from many of the players involved. These commentators present an extremely heartfelt collage of the many facets of what went down during those many years. Included are both Vietnamese and U.S. individuals. Without exception, all of these commentators are very well spoken and articulate clearly their very strong feelings for this bloody chapter of world history. In the closing minutes of the final episode, many of the main commentators are today revealed to be writers of memoirs, poetry, and novels; counselors; historians; teachers; career military officers; doctors; and judges.

Each episode begins with a "Viewer Discretion Advised" warning, alerting viewers that the following episode contains mature content, strong language, and graphic violence. This is well deserved. Most of this material is expected because of the nature of the subject, but there is also a gratuitous, unnecessary topless Jane Fonda video clip (episode 9, from 1:26:25 to 1:27:02).

And then there is the construction of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, a moving tribute of the many thousands of U.S. soldiers who died in Vietnam. Many who were very skeptical of such a memorial came to tears at the first sight of it, some collapsing in emotional exhaustion. This miniseries itself is a beautiful memorial and should be viewed by all Americans above the age of 13.