

On Warnography

After watching the remarkable and monumental documentary *The Vietnam War* by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, broadcast on PBS this fall, I felt compelled to write this essay. The war in Vietnam was one of those epochal events of the last century that dislocated both my life and that of many young men and women of my generation in ways that conscientious thinkers will try to comprehend for decades to come. This landmark documentary could very well be a launch pad for many such critical studies.

The documentary does an excellent job of portraying the points of view of both Americans and Vietnamese through in-depth, heart-rending interviews of veterans and the families of those who did not come back. Many who have watched *The Vietnam War* will tend to blame successive American administrations for their involvement and escalation of the war after the defeat of the Japanese in 1945; and there is no doubt much of the blame lies at the hands of a few very powerful Washington politicians and generals.

Although as an anti-war activist of my generation, I still feel a great deal of sympathy for the Vietnamese people and their century-long struggle to achieve independence and cast off colonial oppression as well as multiple foreign invaders; this documentary has also reminded us of the degree to which the dogged ruthlessness of the Viet Minh, the PAVN and the PLAF-SV (mislabeled “Viet Cong”) paralleled the American military in their barbaric sacrifice of millions during the 30 years of that fratricidal conflict.

As a responsible intellectual, I feel obligated by that documentary to ask a series of questions:

(1) How did the glorification of war and organized violence epitomized by the Vietnam War affect my life choices and those of my peers of the Baby Boomer generation?

(2) To what extent was the ideological bias of the mass media of the fifties and sixties responsible for the Vietnam War; and (2.1) is this documentary another unwitting accomplice in the banalization of a belligerent American weltanschauung?

(3) Are we in the West in a more enlightened state of mind today to be able to judge whether our political and military commitments are leading us to a better, more civilized and peaceful world or, on the contrary, pushing us to further global conflagrations?

Reply to (1): One of the American veterans interviewed in the film said something which greatly struck me (and I’m paraphrasing here): “The human race did not become the top ruling species on the planet by being nice... Some said that the army trained young men to turn them into killers; but I say that was really just finishing school.” I think he hit the nail on the head.

Those young men who eagerly volunteered to go fight the “evil” South-East Asian communists in the fifties and sixties were emulating their fathers and grandfathers who fought in two world wars to “make the world safe for democracy.” So: Yes, the Cold War ideological Manicheism of the years 1945 to 1985 as well as the mass media bias were responsible for not only the Vietnam War, but also many other proxy wars and bloody confrontations of that epoch. The glorification of war and militarism disrupted and violated the lives of Baby Boomers throughout the world –many of whom chose exile or desertion rather than brutality or death.

Reply to (2):

In the fifties and early sixties, many children and adolescents grew up like me watching Hollywood movies and TV shows that portrayed war as great fun, and never showed bloody cadavers rotting in trenches. The “good guys” were always gallant WASP heroes, while the enemy –whether they be labeled “Huns” or “gooks”– were dehumanized monsters who died without much fuss like paper ducks on a carnival shooting range. Hollywood stars such as Ronald Reagan and Audie Murphy were cast as superhuman heroes who won countless battles and came back to marry their sweethearts and revel in universal acclamation and shiny medals. There were practically no African American heroes in those movies; and Asians were opium-smoking villains or demon-like Mongol warriors –usually portrayed by non-Asian actors like Jack Palance. No wonder then that, lured by these imaginary sirens of propaganda, so many young men volunteered to go fight in Vietnam, only to end up mangled, deranged or dead in the hellish quagmire that was the cruel reality of that war.

Building on this cultural phenomenon, there is now a new form of pornography, which I have labeled “**warnography**”:

The development of the new information and communication technologies of the last 40 years has created new global social mass media that have been progressively desensitizing generations of North-Americans to the horrors of war as well as to the use of violence to solve social disputes. Blockbuster films, popular TV shows, video games and computer simulations have been gradually educating young people to accept as normal and even to play with animated images of cadavers, blood splatter and sadistic tortures. Since 9-11, propaganda about satanic terrorist movements has invaded the imagination of millions. Advanced computer systems are blurring the boundary between the Real and the so-called “Virtual Reality.”

As I was writing this essay, news broke of the mass shooting in Las Vegas, perpetrated by a mad man armed with an arsenal of military rifles, which left 58 innocent persons dead and 489 wounded. That massacre was reportedly the 1,516th American mass shooting in the last 1,735 days. What more need be said?

Reply to (2.1): I believe that the documentary *The Vietnam War*, though generally objective, is still an unwitting vehicle for a persistent glorification of patriotic heroics underlying much of the War Memorial / Arlington pathos. Which begs the question: where are the cemeteries for the 1,622,973 victims of that war? *

Reply to (3): Coupled with easy availability of military-grade weapons and the corruption of democratic processes in the United States and other developed countries –including Canada– these tendencies do not bode well for the peaceful resolution of global conflicts. Therefore, the possibility of more horrific global wars such as the one in Vietnam seems to me inevitable.

* Uppsala University in Sweden maintains the Armed Conflict Database. Their estimates for conflict deaths in Vietnam are 164,923 from 1955–64 and 1,458,050 from 1965–75 for a total of 1,622,973. Guenter Lewy's calculations: 282,000 Allied (American and South Vietnamese) military deaths; 444,000 North Vietnam Army and Viet Cong military deaths; **627,000 civilian deaths** (North and South Vietnam); for a total of 1,353,000 deaths.

Written in Montreal, Canada by © Pascual Delgado, October 12th 2017.