

Vietnam Revisited
Posted On:December 31, 1969

The latest Ken Burns documentary, Vietnam, should have been as widely watched as his Civil War documentary. Many people, however, including some of my friends who were in college then, and others, working class and patriotic, have found it too painful to watch. I am sorry that they missed this, because it was an extremely fair revisit that would have been impossible to make short of 50 years passage of time.

The series was punctuated by the popular music of the period and by interviews with participants on both sides of this conflict: Americans and Vietnamese. We hear from national leaders, military officers, historians, common soldiers who became veterans, and families who remembered their young men who died in the conflict. The only other film I remember that attempted to cover a war from both sides was Tora! Tora! Tora! This was a Japanese-American collaboration that showed the series of misunderstandings and missed signals that led up to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Trying to understand the Vietnam War was even more ambitious and far more complex.

When Burns and Novick began this project ten years ago, they never imagined that the divisions that almost tore our country apart in the 1960s could be replicated in our own time, but this is so. We are fractured again over our notions of love of country, belief and disbelief in our government, even trust in science and willful scorn of "experts." The only comfort I can take from the documentary is that such divisions can heal, as we see so movingly in the last hour of the series, when American and Vietnamese veterans, now grandfathers, met and forgave each other.

Foreign policy is a difficult discipline. Nations that differ in history, language, and culture, try to fathom the intentions and nature of the others. The making of American foreign policy has always been a tightrope walk between and among area experts (those who are scholars of another country or culture), election concerns of presidents, long-term and short-term national priorities, the readiness or lack of readiness of our military, and the unknowable unknowns of adversaries. Having good intelligence (spy networks or foreign correspondents) is only as good and trustworthy as its agents.

American policy at the end of World War II when we were the only country left undamaged was to try to organize a world order based on rule of law. We created the United Nations and all of its agencies that helped a wounded world recover; an economic system that promised and gave a world of free trade; and an insistence by the Roosevelt Administration that colonialism was no longer acceptable. We gave up colonial rule over the Philippines (our sole colony) and pushed the British, Dutch, and Belgians, to do the same. Our victory had already destroyed the Nazi, Japanese, and Italian empires, but we were unable to compel our wartime colleague, the Soviets, to disgorge theirs. They seized even more colonies before we could stop them.

What to do then, when Vietnam, whose most distinguished patriot, Ho Chi Minh, educated in France and an ally of ours in a guerilla war against the Japanese, expected the Americans to support Vietnam in independence from French colonialism? Alas for him and for us, our new president, Harry Truman, had the Cold War with Russian and Chinese communism dropped on him. Our desire for European colonial powers to free their colonies was thwarted by a fear that should they do so, the Communists would grab them.

We backed France in its attempt to reoccupy Vietnam. France lost, and we stepped in, initially giving military aid and training to a country now divided into Communist north and corrupt south. Presidents Kennedy and Johnson both knew that our involvement was a mistake, but the domestic politics of the day and our assumption that Communism was a monolith (not knowing how much the Chinese and Russians hated each other) led us to back the wrong horse.

We fought the wrong war, dividing us and doing damage to our trust in democracy.

678 words

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