

# Ten Questions to Help View the Burns & Novick PBS Vietnam War Series with a Critical Eye

Prepared by Paul Lauter, Professor Emeritus, Trinity College  
(with help from his friends)

## 1. How did it happen that there were two countries named “Vietnam”?

Following World War II, the US sought to maintain its newly expanded global power and also to support efforts of its wartime allies to restore their colonial authority. The US relied heavily on military might, which it has continued to deploy on every continent across the globe. In Vietnam, after the war, France tried to reestablish power over its former colonies in Indo-China. The US rejected entreaties from the Vietnamese to support their aspiration for independence from French colonial rule. Instead, the US militarily, financially and diplomatically supported the French effort to regain control over Vietnam. The Vietnamese, led by Ho Chi Minh, resisted, and in 1954 they finally defeated the French in a big battle at Dien Bien Phu. At a peace conference in Geneva, it was agreed that the Vietnamese nationalists, the Viet Minh, would withdraw north of the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel and French forces plus Vietnamese loyal to them would move south of that line. The peace plan called for holding an election in 1956 to establish a national government. President Eisenhower stated his belief that Ho Chi Minh would win such an election. The Americans and the people they brought in to govern the southern half of Vietnam refused to hold the election. What had been an arrangement to separate two military forces and allow people to move to places where they felt less threatened by religious or political conflicts turned into two separate countries. This forcible division of the country was not accepted by most Vietnamese, who remained historically and culturally united.

## 2. Why did armed conflict begin again in the southern half of Vietnam?

This is a particularly controversial question. Some pro-war commentators blame communists who had remained in the countryside after 1954. Others blame efforts by the Saigon authorities to arrest and kill southerners who had been active in the anti-French war. In the 1950s, American policy was often determined by anti-communism, in particular fear of China’s influence. Burns and Novick describe the American course of action as “well-intentioned,” but significant foreign policy and military leaders favored intervention to prevent communism from taking over Vietnam even if it was supported by the people. They claimed it might spread elsewhere in Asia (the “domino” theory). Some Americans also saw economic opportunities in Southeast Asia.

Many other factors were operating within Vietnam. The governing group in the south put in place by the Americans were mainly Catholics who tried to dominate an overwhelmingly Buddhist population. Then, too, their government tried to restore ownership of property to landlords who had been driven out during the anti-colonial war. In fact, a basic goal of the program of the National Liberation Front (NLF), known to the Americans as the “Viet Cong,” was “land to the tillers”: peasants should own the property

they cultivated. The possibility of ownership strongly motivated villagers to defy the landlords and the government that supported them. Many of the people the government tried to put in charge of villages and districts had French colonial ties. Often, they proved to be corrupt; indeed, corruption remained a problem throughout the brief history of “South Vietnam.” The government also tried to control the rural population by moving thousands of people from their traditional villages to barren armed camps called “strategic hamlets”; this effort, which cost many lives, mostly heightened resistance. Beginning in 1965, once the Americans had sent in large numbers of soldiers, many Vietnamese fought, as they had before, to rid their country of foreigners: the Chinese, the French, the Japanese, and now the Americans.

### **3. Didn't the Tonkin Gulf Resolution passed by Congress in 1964 give the President authority to send to Vietnam as many troops as he thought necessary?**

That is certainly how President Johnson and, later, President Nixon interpreted the Resolution. North Vietnamese gunboats, they said, had made unprovoked attacks on American ships on the high seas, and that it was necessary for the U.S. to respond. There were two problems with that story. First, what were American destroyers doing close to islands off the far North coast of Vietnam? They were apparently spying on North Vietnamese military installations, and likely sharing information with the South Vietnamese. The South Vietnamese were carrying out commando raids and other attacks on such facilities. Second, American officials, especially Defense Secretary McNamara, misled Congress about what had occurred. Whatever actually went on, and the record is unclear, the Americans in short order began bombing North Vietnam in February, 1965. By March, the U.S. had begun landing large numbers of combat troops in the country.

### **4. Was the massacre at My Lai (16 March 1968) an exceptional event, a product of American military policy, or was it produced by other factors?**

At My Lai, Company C of the Americal Division, led by Captain Ernest Medina and Lt. William Calley, killed over 500 civilian villagers, almost all of them women, children, and old men. General S. W. Koster, commander of the Americal Division, along with Medina and Calley, was charged in the My Lai atrocity. In his memoir, he admitted that My Lai was “the conscious massacre of defenseless babies, children, mothers, and old men in a kind of diabolical slow-motion nightmare that went on for the better part of a day, with a cold-blooded break for lunch.” The slaughter might have been even worse but for the intervention of an American helicopter pilot, Hugh Thompson, Jr.

Recent scholarship has confirmed that there were many My Lai's, though perhaps none so large and brutal. In part, the massacre was an expression of the American effort to break the Vietnamese will to fight by attacking civilian targets, both from the air and on the ground. That was one explicit goal of the “Rolling Thunder” bombing campaign, which continued from early 1965 until late 1968. Other policies pursued the same goal--the establishment of “free fire zones,” the emphasis on “body counts,” and the CIA-run

“Phoenix” program, which involved the imprisonment, torture and killing of civilians “suspected” of supporting the National Liberation Front. From boot camp onward, GIs were indoctrinated in dehumanizing the Vietnamese: they learned to demean them in language (e.g., “Gooks”) and policy that made them appear as less than human.

But also: by 1968 most American GIs were sick and tired of the war. They were constantly under threat of death or maiming, they steadily lost comrades, they were sent on missions whose purpose was obscure, they were told any and all villagers were “Viet Cong,” and were likely booby-trapped to kill them. Some GIs took to drugs, some refused to go on patrols, and some, given the occasion, took out their rage on the Vietnamese. These behaviors “explain,” in part, what happened in My Lai and elsewhere.

## **5. Did the peace movement have a significant impact on ending the war?**

Yes. Opposition to the war helped bring down two American Presidents and contributed to the collapse of US intervention in Vietnam. Other US wars, before and since, engendered opposition. But nothing on the scale and impact of the mass movement of the 1960’s and 70’s. Yet, the Burns and Novick series ignored and diminished the impact of the peace movement. Not surprisingly, the Pentagon’s official account of the war largely ignores it as well.

Anti-war activity took many forms within the United States (we will look at anti-war actions among GIs separately). The first to oppose the war early on were members of traditional “peace” churches, like the Quakers, Brethren, and Mennonites. They and other denominations organized local vigils and offered draft counseling. Rather than serve in the military, thousands of “conscientious objectors” did two years of alternative service or worked in the military in non-combat roles. As the war continued, a significant number of young men who were not members of pacifist religions were able to claim conscientious objector (C.O.) status. The Supreme Court ruled that if their beliefs played the same role in their lives as religious beliefs occupied in the lives of religious pacifists, then they were entitled to be registered as C.O.s.

Not mentioned at all in the Burns & Novick series is that over 500,000 young men rejected the draft system and the war altogether and refused to be inducted into the military, facing up to 5 years in federal prison. Some burned their draft cards, tens of thousands returned their cards to the Selective Service, others organized “We Won’t Go” rallies, 4,000 resisters went to prison, and thousands also went to Canada. Starting in 1965, their willingness to face jail or exile or calumny challenged the morality of the government’s pursuit of the war and made it more difficult to escalate troop deployments. Resisters were supported by significant numbers of writers, teachers, and other intellectuals, who signed calls and petitions stating their intention to violate the Selective Service law by encouraging young men to refuse the draft. Partly as a result, the draft was ended in 1973.

The first large-scale demonstration against the war took place in Washington, April 17, 1965, little more than a month after substantial numbers of American combat troops had landed on the beach at Da Nang, Vietnam. Prior to 1965, smaller militant actions led

by peace organizations like the War Resisters League and Women Strike for Peace had been held in New York and Washington. The 1965 demonstration organized by Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) attracted a much larger number of participants than had been expected, 20,000-25,000. Beginning in 1965 students and faculty organized all-night teach-ins to examine the history of Vietnam's struggle for independence and the painful truth about America's retrograde policy in Southeast Asia. As the President escalated the war—more troops, more bombing, more falsehoods about American intentions—the peace movement organized larger and more confrontational demonstrations.

On April 4, 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke against the Vietnam War at Riverside Church in New York, urging an end to the three evils: militarism, poverty and racism. He tied international human rights to civil rights and emphasized that the U.S. could not fight a War on Poverty and a War on Vietnam. His highly controversial position resonated with many who had begun to doubt the war.

Vietnam Summer sent 500 paid staff and mobilized 26,000 volunteers to take the anti-war movement into communities nationwide. In October 1967, the Pentagon demonstration drew 100,000 or more protestors from across the nation, including 50,000 who marched to the doors of the Pentagon, tried to enter the building, attempted in a bit of Yippie theatre to “levitate” the structure, sat down in front of troops deployed to keep them away, and otherwise committed “civil disobedience.” 683 were arrested. Increasing numbers of protests, large and small, took place across the country, especially on college campuses. The 1969 “Moratorium” mobilized more than half a million protestors at hundreds of campuses and communities nationwide in October and in mass demonstrations in Washington and San Francisco in November.

Alongside such activities, some protesters carried out militant actions of a kind unseen before in America. Catholic priests and their supporters seized files from draft boards in Baltimore, Catonsville, MD, Milwaukee, and elsewhere; they poured blood over them or set them afire with home-made napalm. In May 1971, thousands of protesters attempted to shut down traffic and government business in Washington, D.C. Corporations were criticized for their support of and profits from the war. The Bank of America, a major sponsor of the Burns & Novick series, was a frequent target and one branch was set on fire. Campus ROTC facilities were burned down. In a number of places, bombs were set off, including one at the Army Math Center at the University of Wisconsin, where a graduate student was killed. Alice Herz and Norman Morrison set themselves on fire as a form of anti-war protest.

Pressed by constituents, members of Congress and three Presidential campaigns (McCarthy, Bobby Kennedy, McGovern) moved to end the war, or at least American participation in it. A final coordinated lobbying campaign by activists led Congress in 1973 to stop US bombing and restrict US military aid, contributing to the collapse of the South Vietnamese army and government. The peace movement kept the issue of the war at a constant boil, and was able to sustain anti-war activity even after American forces largely withdrew. The unceasing agitation forced government officials, journalists, university administrators, the military brass, even businessmen to respond to the demand to bring the troops home now and to end support for the war.

## 6. How did GIs and veterans, men and women, act as a force for peace?

Armies have always contended with soldiers who for one reason or another have come to oppose a war. But during the Vietnam War, GI resistance became far more widespread than it had ever been in US history and many soldiers were sent to prison because of their opposition. A number of brave individuals refused orders to go to Vietnam to fight, or in the case of Dr. Howard Levy, refused to teach Green Berets elementary dermatology, which they would use simply to recruit villagers to the American side. GIs began to produce underground anti-war newspapers, hundreds of them, at virtually every American base around the world. These newspapers provided information about the realities of the war and opposition to it. Off-base coffee houses, generally started by peace movement veterans with civilian support, provided space for meeting and organizing activities. Resistance soon spread, encouraged by their generation's alienation. In Vietnam, soldiers could quickly see the folly and brutality of American ground actions, such as destroying villagers' homes and rice fields, or needlessly taking the same hill again and again at great loss of life and limb. They saw the disproportionate fatality rates among black and brown soldiers, as well as among recent draftees. They knew the military brass's predictions of "light at the end of the tunnel" were delusions.

Opposition varied. Some soldiers went AWOL—half a million between 1966 and 1973. Some spaced out on marijuana—and even heroin. Others just said "No" to going on patrols. Incidents of "fragging"—rolling a fragmentation grenade under the tent of a gung-ho officer or non-com—became sufficiently widespread to lead to a Congressional investigation in 1973. In a 1971 issue of the *Armed Forces Journal* Col. Robert D. Heinl, Jr. wrote an article alarmingly titled "The Collapse of the Armed Forces." Returning GIs, beginning in 1967, formed Vietnam Veterans Against the War; they participated in, and often led, many marches and demonstrations and they organized the "Winter Soldier Hearings" to expose the atrocities they had witnessed. Hundreds returned their medals.

The resistance of grunts on the ground and the high rate of American casualties undoubtedly limited the military options available to the Nixon Administration. It led them to shift focus to expanding the air war. But even there they were met with creative efforts by sailors and airmen to limit the deployment of aircraft carriers and B-52 bombers. At the same time, the Vietnamese became skilled at bringing down even the high-flying super-fortresses. The gravity of resistance within the military, along with the domestic pressures of anti-war activity and growing Congressional disaffection with the war, pushed the Nixon Administration toward withdrawal of American forces and finally to return to the peace table.

The Burns & Novick series not only fails to report the strength, diversity and seriousness of the anti-war movement, it also woefully mischaracterizes the mutually supportive relationship between civilian peace activists, active duty GI's and veterans. Instead, their documentary presents a divisive myth, unsupported by evidence, that anti-war activists spat upon returning soldiers.

## 7. Why were the “Pentagon Papers” such a big deal?

The “Pentagon Papers” were actually a top secret series of studies of American policies and actions in Vietnam commissioned by Secretary of Defense McNamara. They were copied and distributed by defense analyst Daniel Ellsberg, who risked life in prison to make the documents public. When the *New York Times* began to publish excerpts on June 13, 1971, the Nixon administration got an injunction to stop the presses. It also sought an injunction against the *Washington Post* when that paper decided to print them. Many other papers began circulating material from the Pentagon Papers despite government legal challenges. The Supreme Court ruled the First Amendment protected the rights of the news media to publish them. Henry Kissinger called Daniel Ellsberg “the most dangerous man in America.” Why?

Ellsberg was motivated to copy and release the Pentagon Papers as he viewed the 1967 March on the Pentagon from inside the building standing a few feet from McNamara. Privately, McNamara acknowledged even then that the Vietnam War could not be won. As the Pentagon Papers showed, American political and military leaders had systematically lied to the American people about virtually everything related to Vietnam, from the repressive character of the US created government of the South to American “progress” in the war. Further revelations of the duplicity and miscalculations of American leaders would, they feared, have the effect of turning more Americans against the war, which is what happened. The Nixon administration’s hysterical overreaction to the circulation of the Papers led them to take illegal actions—including secretly raiding the files of Ellsberg’s psychiatrist—that antagonized many Americans, including members of Congress, and helped lead to Nixon’s impeachment and forced resignation. Ultimately, the case reinforced the Constitutional guarantee of freedom of the press and Ellsberg never was sent to prison.

## 8. Did Nixon really have a “secret plan” to end the Vietnam War?

It is not clear that Nixon actually had a plan to end the war when he was first elected. In fact his campaign sabotaged the on-going Paris Peace Talks by urging the Saigon government to oppose an agreement. It is certainly true that, like other presidents before him, he did not want to be blamed if Vietnam were “lost” on his watch. Still, he and his advisers adopted policies designed to reduce the impact of the war on daily life in the United States. To that end, American participation in the war shifted from fighting on the ground to even more destructive air war. The United States provided the South Vietnamese military with weapons and air support but gradually withdrew American troops from ground combat, a tactic called “Vietnamization.” This change significantly reduced US combat losses, the need for ground troops, and thus the necessity for draftees. American combat fatalities (in total over 58,000) fell from a high of 16,592 in 1968 to 641 in 1972. The Nixon Administration also instituted a lottery system for the draft and began reducing draft calls. As a result the color of the corpses changed and men with high lottery numbers, who were unlikely ever to be called, felt less motivated to oppose the draft and the war.

While the Nixon Administration continued discussions with North Vietnam (and with the Soviet Union, among others) to bring about a reduction or even an end to hostilities, it simultaneously increased bombing of the North, as well as of Cambodia and Laos. The bombs were a message: this administration was prepared to escalate the air war unless North Vietnam would accept its terms for peace. Indeed, in 1972, Nixon mined North Vietnam's harbors and launched an even more intensive bombing campaign against North Vietnam's heartland, even as Henry Kissinger was negotiating with Le Duc Tho.

The continued escalation enraged peace activists, although it pleased those supporting the war. Some anti-war organizers launched efforts—massive demonstrations, direct actions like blocking the streets of Washington --to make the United States feel ungovernable unless it ended the war. “Bring the war home” was one slogan of student radicals. The country had indeed come to seem anarchic, with the National Guard shooting four student to death at Kent State University in 1970 and police killing two students and wounding twelve at Jackson State University ten days later. Their deaths prompted protests and strikes at campuses across the country. Nixon portrayed anti-war activities as hostile to the values of those he termed the “silent majority.” He did what he could to turn the actions of some in the peace movement against the movement's goal of ending the war. Attacks on anti-war protestors, “Vietnamization,” the public and secret negotiations over a peace treaty were less expressions of a consistent policy than they were efforts to salvage some sentiment to continue making war among Americans, a majority of whom by the 1970s wanted it to end.

## **9. The Vietnam War ended nearly five decades ago: why are peace and human rights activists still contesting its meanings?**

The short answer has to do with truth: the anti-war movement told the truth about the American war on Vietnam, whereas successive United States administrations lied to the American public – a dangerous tactic in a democracy. As a number of wise people have said, “those who do not understand the past are bound to repeat it.” American policy in the Middle East illustrates that. The Iraq War was also based on untruths.

Policies that disregard the lessons to be learned from the Vietnam War also abuse the valor and the legacy of the soldiers who fought there, the peace activists who tried to bring the war to an end, the Vietnamese and other Asian people who had their lives disrupted for decades, the more than three million people who were killed and the millions more post-war victims. Sustaining democracy depends on acknowledging and learning from past mistakes, and a government that tells the truth to its citizens. It requires overcoming the arrogance of ego-anxious leaders; it requires affirming the values we like to attribute to the United States: democracy, decency, and justice.

Without question, Americans viciously maltreated our fellow human beings in Southeast Asia, killing and maiming millions of Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians. We have a duty to those we harmed: to try undoing the legacies of the war, including the effects of Agent Orange and remaining unexploded mines and munitions. If Americans hope ever again to play a constructive role in the world's future, we must at last accept responsibility for our history of dishonesty and cruelty in Southeast Asia.

## 10. What should you do when you believe war is not the answer?

Don't rely upon "official" policy. Dig deeper and ask hard questions.  
Connect with other concerned friends. March and lobby for Peace.  
Support anti-war candidates for public office. Vote. Run for office yourself.

Though not included in the PBS Vietnam Series, Ken Burns and Lynn Novick wrote in the October 2017 **Atlantic Magazine** a primary lesson of the Vietnam War:

*"The duty of citizens in a democracy is to be skeptical—not to worship our leaders, who have always been fallible, but to question their decisions, challenge their policies, and hold them accountable for their failures."*

---

**FOR MORE ANALYSIS AND CRITIQUES OF THE PBS VIETNAM WAR SERIES  
AND OTHER RESOURCES ON THE WAR AND PEACE MOVEMENT  
VISIT THE VIETNAM PEACE COMMEMORATION COMMITTEE WEB SITE:**

**[www.vietnampeace.org/blog](http://www.vietnampeace.org/blog)**

---