

# THE VIETNAM WAR

A FILM BY KEN BURNS & LYNN NOVICK

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**EVENT SCREENER SUMMARY**

Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's ten-part, 18-hour documentary series, *THE VIETNAM WAR*, tells the epic story of one of the most consequential, divisive, and controversial events in American history as it has never before been told on film. Visceral and immersive, the series explores the human dimensions of the war through revelatory testimony of nearly 80 witnesses from all sides—Americans who fought in the war and others who opposed it, as well as combatants and civilians from North and South Vietnam.

**Excerpt from Episode 1: "Déjà Vu" (1858-1961)**  
*Introduction (8:20)*

The Vietnam War seemed to call everything into question – Those who lived through it have never been able to erase its memory; have never stopped arguing about what really happened, why everything went so badly wrong, who was to blame, and whether it was worth it.

**Excerpts from Episode 3: "The River Styx" (January 1964-December 1965)**

*The Gulf of Tonkin (7:40)*

The Gulf of Tonkin incident is one of the most controversial and consequential events in American history. In the immediate aftermath, Everett Alvarez Jr., a U.S. pilot, was shot down over the Gulf of Tonkin and captured by North Vietnamese military.

*Early Antiwar Movement (3:35)*

During the beginning stages of the Vietnam War, there was a small and growing number of individuals who opposed the war for a number of reasons. In the spring of 1965, the Students for a Democratic Society organized a demonstration at the White House, drawing 25,000 individuals who were part of the early antiwar movement.

**Excerpt from Episode 4: "Resolve" (January 1966-June 1967)**  
*Le Quan Cong & Mai Elliott (3:45)*

We see the perspectives of a Viet Cong soldier and the daughter of a South Vietnamese government official.

**Excerpt from Episode 5: "This Is What We Do" (July 1967-December 1967)**

*Con Thien (4:06)*

Marines recall their time at Con Thien (meaning "Hill of Angels") – a United States Marine Corps combat base located in North Vietnam.

**Excerpt from Episode 6: "Things Fall Apart" (January 1968-July 1968)**  
*Tet, Carson to Ben Tre (10:34)*

The Tet Offensive was one of the Vietnam War's most ambitious military campaigns. It was launched on January 30, 1968 by North Vietnam against South Vietnam, The United States Armed Forces, and their allies. Early wire services dispatches reported the Embassy attack incorrectly and the American press focused almost entirely on the fighting in Saigon, but the Tet Offensive was happening nearly everywhere. *NOTE: This clip includes content that may be disturbing to some viewers.*

**Excerpts from Episode 7: "The Veneer of Civilization" (June 1968-May 1969)**

*Post Tet (4:44)*

A few weeks after the Tet Offensive, propaganda efforts led the North Vietnamese to believe the Tet Offensive was a series of tremendous victories and losses were insignificant – there were seldom any mentions of defeat.

*Michael Holmes (5:31)*

20-year-old Michael Holmes was drafted as an Army private and arrived in Vietnam on August 29, 1968 – the day after the riots at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago.

**Excerpt from Episode 8: "The History of the World" (April 1969-May 1970)**

*Moratorium (6:46)*

With morale plummeting in Vietnam and the American public growing weary of the war, the national Moratorium on October 15, 1969 was the largest outpouring of public dissent in American history.

**Excerpt from Episode 9: "A Disrespectful Loyalty" (May 1970-March 1973)**

*POWs Return (5:09)*

In 1973, 591 American Prisoners of War (POWs) held by North Vietnam were released.

**Excerpt from Episode 10: "The Weight of Memory" (March 1973-Onward)**

*Bao Ninh Comes Home (1:35)*

A North Vietnam Army soldier returns home after six years of having no contact with his family.

## EVENT SCREENER - THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

### GENERAL QUESTIONS

- What does the Vietnam War mean to you?
- What does *service* mean to you?
- Why is the Vietnam War still so divisive to many Americans?
- How did the Vietnam Veterans Memorial help veterans and the public come to terms with the veterans' service?
- If you were not born or a young child during this period - What would you have done during the Vietnam War? Would you have supported or opposed it?

### MEDIA AND JOURNALISM

- Did the discrepancy between media reports of the war and the government's official reporting affect Americans' opinions of the war?
- Journalist Joe Galloway says, "You can't just be a neutral witness to something like war. It crawls down your throat." What is the expectation for objective reporting in a time like the Vietnam War? How do we continue to reconcile those thoughts with conflicts today?
- How can the government's need to maintain national security and the public's right to know the truth ever be reconciled?
- How does Daniel Ellsberg and the release of the Pentagon Papers compare with Wikileaks? Or Edward Snowden?
- In the years after the Vietnam War, film and television programs depicted scenes of explosive violence through fictionalized narratives. How have movies like *Full Metal Jacket*, *Apocalypse Now*, and *Born on the Fourth of July* contribute to the general public's understanding of the Vietnam War experience?

### SERVICE AND LEADERSHIP

- What motivated American men and women to serve in the Vietnam War?
- Why is there still debate regarding the events in the Gulf of Tonkin?
- Teach-ins appeared on university campuses as a way to promote conversations about the war. Did this change anything?
- How did the motivations of American and Vietnamese soldiers change over the duration of the war?
- How does America apply the lessons learned in the Vietnam War to the challenges facing us today?
- How did the Vietnam Veterans Memorial help veterans and the public come to terms with the veterans' service?
- How have our attitudes toward our servicemen/women and veterans changed over time?
- How have our attitudes toward refugees who have served in American forces changed over time, if at all?

### ANTI-WAR AND PEACE

- How did the anti-war movement change over time? Did the movement affect policy? Did it reflect public opinion or change it?
- How did the civil rights, women's rights, and environmental rights movements connect to the anti-war movement?

### VIETNAMESE AND SOUTHEAST ASIAN PERSPECTIVE

- In what ways did the United States fail to understand the Vietnamese people and their history, culture, and government?
- Watching the "Le Quan Cong" clip, you hear of how each of his siblings was killed in the war. Yet his mother encouraged her youngest son to join the fight. What was the motivation to sacrifice her family for the war?
- In the "Weight of Memory" clip, North Vietnamese soldier Bao Ninh describes his homecoming after being gone for six years with no contact with his family. What was the reaction when some soldiers returned after being away for so long? How did these long periods of service without communication affect the morale of the soldiers and the North Vietnamese?
- How were the Vietnamese communists such an effective force, considering that they were fighting American troops with greater wealth and superior technology?
- What happened to Vietnamese who fought with the Americans and were sent to "reeducation camps" after the war?
- What were the costs of the Vietnam War? What happened to the country of Vietnam after the war?
- What did the United States and Vietnam gain by normalizing relations in 1995?
- How have portrayals of America and Americans changed in Vietnamese popular culture and news journalism since the end of the war? Have there been any noticeable changes in how Vietnamese people are portrayed in American popular culture and news journalism?

### HOMEFRONT

- How did political and societal changes—the civil rights movement, the women's movement—of the 1960s serve as catalysts for the divergent views on the Vietnam War?
- What is patriotism? Are we obligated to still hold the government accountable for its actions?
- How did the music of this time affect and reflect the feelings of those on the battlefield and at home?
- Does America apply the lessons learned in the Vietnam War toward the challenges facing us today—such as foreign conflicts, military deployments, and refugees?
- How did soldiers' letters, tapes, home movies, and personal photos contribute to Americans' understanding of the war?