
FUTURE OF FREEDOM

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Never do anything against conscience, even if the state demands it.

— *Albert Einstein*

FUTURE OF FREEDOM

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Dismantling Roosevelt's New Deal

by *Jacob G. Hornberger*



In the midst of the congressional debate over Donald Trump's tax bill, leftists accused Republicans of planning to dismantle Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. While the fear-mongering was baseless, given that Republicans favor the New Deal programs and philosophy as much as liberals do, the question naturally arises: Why shouldn't Americans dismantle this almost-century-old socialist and interventionist experiment?

It is impossible to overstate the significance of what Roosevelt's New Deal did to America. It revolutionized the country's economic system, converting it from one based on free markets and voluntary charity to one based on socialism and mandatory charity.

In 1787, notwithstanding slavery, tariffs, and many smaller violations of liberty, the American people brought into existence the most unusual — and the freest — society in history. Imagine:

- Virtually no economic regulations. People were free to engage in economic enterprises without securing a license, permit, or other form of governmental consent. That was what was meant by the term “free enterprise” — not reduced regulation but rather economic enterprise that was free from governmental control or interference.
- No income tax. People were free to keep everything they earned. No IRS or income-tax returns.
- No Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, subsidies, education grants, foreign aid, or other welfare programs.
- No immigration controls. People were free to come to the United States from anywhere in the world, knowing that they would not be forcibly repatriated.
- No Federal Reserve System or paper money. The official money of the United States was gold coins and silver coins.
- No foreign wars in Europe, Asia, or Africa.
- A relatively small military force. No CIA. No NSA.

- No secret police force (e.g., no FBI and no IRS investigators).
- No mandatory school-attendance laws (except in Massachusetts) and no systems of public (i.e., government) schooling.
- No passports and no restrictions on travel.
- No sanctions or embargoes on foreign nations (except for the embargo acts of 1807 and 1809 during the Napoleonic Wars).

The framework for this unusual way of life was the U.S. Constitution. Bringing into existence the federal government, the Constitution set forth its powers, which were few and limited.

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The result of this way of life, especially in the late 1800s, was the freest, most prosperous, healthiest, most educated, and most charitable society in history. Every day, people from all over the world were flooding into the United States to get a taste of this unique society.

The reason our American ancestors wanted a limited government — that is, one whose powers were limited — is that they understood

that people's own government constitutes the greatest threat to their freedom. By limiting the powers of government, they stood a better chance of being free.

The amazing byproduct of this way of life was an unbelievable economic prosperity. People were going from rags to riches in two or three generations, sometimes less. One main reason was savings and capital. When people were free to engage in economic enterprise without governmental interference or permission and to keep the fruits of their earnings, they tended to save a portion of their income. Savings were deposited into banks, which lent the money to businesses, which invested in better tools and equipment, which made workers more productive. Higher productivity meant higher wage rates and increased profits, leading to even more savings and more capital accumulation. It was an upward cycle of ever-increasing overall prosperity. Sound money reinforced the process.

While their intention was to establish a government based on the concept of individual freedom, Americans stumbled onto a cure for poverty, the societal ill that had bedeviled mankind for centuries. All that any society had to do to end

poverty was to adopt a governmental structure by which officials were not authorized to control or interfere with economic activity, where people were free to accumulate unlimited amounts of wealth (i.e., no income tax), and where people were not forced to participate in mandatory charity.

From freedom to socialism

In the late 1800s, seeds of change began to be planted. Enamored with the socialist philosophy and socialist ideas that were gaining ground in Europe, American “progressives” began advocating that the United States adopt socialist principles, such as income taxation, governmental control and regulation of economic activity, a central bank and paper money, and mandatory charity programs.

Their reasoning was as follows: Notwithstanding the enormous prosperity in the United States in the late 1800s, economic conditions were still extremely difficult for many families. That was reflected by the fact that many women and children were sent into the workplace just to survive.

That shouldn't have surprised anyone. When a society has little wealth, economic conditions are going to be extremely difficult for most

people. As the overall society begins to accumulate wealth, conditions are alleviated for some, but still horribly difficult for others. As the society gets increasingly wealthy, the number of impoverished families continually drops, even if there are still some who are experiencing difficulty or destitution.

American “progressives” began advocating that the United States adopt socialist principles.

What mattered, however, was the ever-upward incline in the overall societal standard of living. That's what progressives failed to recognize. By focusing on the brutal conditions that still existed for some in the late 1800s, they figured that Americans would be better off abandoning their unique economic system in favor of a socialist and paternalist one — e.g., one in which the government planned or controlled economic activity and promised to take care of people by taxing the rich and giving the money to the poor.

What progressives and other Americans failed to realize, however, was that while taxing Peter to give the money to Paul might help Paul in the short run, an economic system based on that principle

would ultimately cause the upward incline in prosperity to slow, then stop, and then devolve into a cycle of economic decline.

From the late 1800s to the 1930s, there were enormous debates over the future direction of the United States. On the one side were arrayed the proponents of economic liberty. On the other side were arrayed the proponents of socialism and interventionism.

Demonstrating the power of ideas, for better or worse, the progressives brought about a shift in public opinion in favor of their philosophy.

The federal government would now wield the authority to establish mandatory charity programs.

In 1913, for example, progressives succeeded in their efforts to get a federal income tax imposed on the American people. At first, hardly anyone paid attention, especially since progressives promised that it would be levied only on the rich. Over time, nearly everyone would end up having a large portion of his income taken from him by the federal government.

In that same year, progressives succeeded in their efforts to get a

central bank for the country, which became known as the Federal Reserve System. It would ultimately open the floodgates for federal spending and debt, which, in turn, would end up destroying America's gold-coin, silver-coin monetary system and replacing it with one based on irredeemable paper notes.

It all came to a head in the 1930s with the adoption of Roosevelt's New Deal. Using the crisis of the Great Depression as an excuse, Roosevelt proceeded to revolutionize America's economic and monetary systems.

One New Deal principle was that the federal government would now wield the authority to establish mandatory charity programs — that is, programs by which the government would use the Internal Revenue Service (which progressives brought into existence in 1913) to take money from one group of people in order to give it to another group. That, of course, was the essence of the socialist philosophy that progressives had been advocating — the notion that government should take care of people, force people to be good and caring, and coercively confiscate and redistribute wealth.

The crown jewel of this system was Social Security, a governmental

program that originated among socialists in Germany and was ultimately adopted by the “Iron Chancellor of Germany,” Otto von Bismarck. That’s why a bust of Bismarck today appears on the website of the U.S. Social Security Administration.

The truth was that America’s free-enterprise system had not failed at all.

It is impossible to overstate the significance of Social Security. Not only was it the first socialist program in the United States, it also heralded the new economic system that was now to guide America — one that became known as the “welfare state,” a way of life in which the American people would no longer be fully free to make their own charitable decisions, but instead one in which the federal government would wield the power to force them to make charitable outlays.

Many Americans, including seniors, are convinced that Social Security is a retirement account, one by which they “put into” the system and then get their money back when they get old. Nothing could be further from the truth. From the very beginning, Social Security was established as a welfare program, one

that took people’s money and gave it to seniors. There never has been a retirement account or a Social Security “fund,” and there never will be. Social Security is a standard socialist program, no different from any other.

Once Social Security was enacted, the floodgates were open to an entire panoply of welfare programs, including Medicare and Medicaid, farm subsidies, food stamps, foreign aid, education grants, and many more. There is no end to what can be done when government confiscates people’s money and gives it to others.

The irony was that it was the federal government that was the cause of the 1929 stock-market crash that brought on the Great Depression. Needless to say, that’s not what U.S. officials told the American people at the time. They said that the crash and the Depression were the result of the failure of America’s free-enterprise system. The New Deal, Roosevelt maintained, was not an abandonment of America’s free-enterprise system but instead a way to save it.

It was all a lie, through and through. The truth was that America’s free-enterprise system had not failed at all. Instead, it was monetary central planning by the Federal Re-

serve System that had been established in 1913 at the urging of progressives that brought the 1929 crash and the Great Depression. Roosevelt's New Deal then rejected and abandoned the unique free-enterprise way of life that had come to characterize the American people in favor of a redistributive welfare state.

Increased regulation

Unfortunately, Roosevelt didn't stop with a welfare-state revolution. His New Deal also made it clear that the federal government would now wield the power to control, manage, plan, and interfere with economic activity. The most extreme example of this was his National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), which ordered American businesses and industries into cartels that wielded the authority to set prices and establish other workplace conditions.

Roosevelt's welfare-state, regulatory-state system was similar to what Hitler and Mussolini were establishing.

It would be difficult to find a better example of a violation of free-enterprise principles (i.e., enterprise that is free of governmental control) than the NIRA. In fact, the entire

program, including its infamous "Blue Eagle" propaganda campaign, would have fit perfectly in Benito Mussolini's fascist Italy. Perhaps that's why the U.S. Supreme Court declared his obviously fascist program unconstitutional, even while leaving most of Roosevelt's other regulatory powers intact.

For a good understanding of how different Roosevelt's New Deal was, compared with America's founding economic system, see *Three New Deals: Reflections on Roosevelt's America, Mussolini's Italy, and Hitler's Germany, 1933–1939*, by Wolfgang Schivelbusch. The fact is that Roosevelt's welfare-state, regulatory-state revolutionary system was similar to what Hitler and Mussolini were establishing in their respective countries to combat the depressions in their countries.

Roosevelt also revolutionized America's monetary system by adopting a policy of nationalization that was being employed in the Soviet Union and other communist regimes. Soon after taking office, he decreed an end to the gold-coin standard on which the nation was founded and which had been America's monetary system for more than 100 years. He decreed that thenceforth the United States would operate under a system of paper money

that was not redeemable in gold. Nationalizing gold, he ordered every American to turn in his gold coins to the federal government, which would pay him in irredeemable Federal Reserve notes. Anyone failing or refusing to do so would be hit with a felony criminal prosecution and harsh punishment. Adding insult to injury, soon after the nationalization Roosevelt devalued the paper money that he had just recently ordered Americans to use.

Faced with ever-growing confiscation of a portion of their income, many Americans are unable to save anything.

The conversion to a paper-money standard and the use of the income tax, combined with a welfare-state and regulatory state and, later, a warfare state, opened the floodgates to unrestrained federal spending and debt, which today, 73 years after Roosevelt's reign, has headed the federal government toward financial bankruptcy.

Even worse is what the welfare state has done to the ever-increasing upward momentum of economic prosperity. Faced with ever-growing confiscation of a portion of their income, many Americans are unable to save anything, living from pay-

check to paycheck. The decreased growth in savings and capital has served to stifle economic growth and standards of living.

Helpless Americans

Worse yet is what it has done to the American people, making so many of them helpless wards of the state, convinced that they would not survive without the government's serving as their parent and convinced that they have a right to get into the pocketbooks of others and take their money, so long as the state does it for them. Social Security and Medicare are the prime drivers of this phenomenon.

Worst of all is the belief among so many Americans that the welfare-state, regulated-economy way of life constitutes "freedom." From the first grade in the government-approved schools to which their parents are forced to send them, people are inculcated with the notion that they are growing up in a free society, one in which Roosevelt's New Deal purported to save America's "free enterprise" system. They are expected to block out of their minds that Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, subsidies, income taxation, a Federal Reserve System, public (i.e., government) schooling, and drug laws are core

elements of the systems in Cuba, North Korea, and other socialist countries. Americans embody perfectly the immortal words of Johann von Goethe: None are more hopelessly enslaved than those who falsely believe they are free. The psychosis from living such a life of the lie might explain the massive level of alcoholism, drug addiction, suicide, violence, and other dysfunctionalities of American society.

And here's the kicker: This revolutionary transformation of America's economic and political system was all done without even the semblance of a constitutional amendment.

The purpose of the amendment process was to enable Americans to alter their form of government in fundamentally different ways. It would be difficult to find a more fundamental change in America's governmental structure than what Roosevelt did with his New Deal. Yet, he was permitted to achieve his economic and monetary revolution simply through decree and legislation.

Our American ancestors understood the dangers that crises posed to their liberty and well-being. They understood that governments inevitably seized upon crises to take away the freedoms of the citizenry, in the

name of "temporarily" keeping them safe and secure.

That was the message that Roosevelt delivered to the American people — that his New Deal was designed simply to address the temporary emergency of the American people. It was a lie, as Americans were later to realize. In fact, he was using what was obviously a temporary economic emergency to accomplish a permanent and revolutionary change in America's governmental structure. After all, the Great Depression ended in the 1940s. Yet we are still saddled with the economic system and programs that were enacted to address the Depression, with Social Security being the prime example.

**It's long past time
to dismantle, not reform,
Roosevelt's New Deal.**

Americans had more than a hundred years of a genuine free-enterprise system, one in which people were free to engage in economic enterprise without governmental interference, accumulate unlimited amounts of wealth, and do whatever they wanted with their own money.

Americans have also had 85 years of a false and fake "free enterprise" system, one in which the

government controls, regulates, and plans economic activity; wields the unlimited power to tax and plunder people, and forces people to participate in mandatory charity programs.

It's time for Americans to do some serious reevaluating before their socialist system does even more damage. It's long past time to dismantle, not reform, Roosevelt's New Deal and restore America's founding principles of economic liberty to our land.

Jacob Hornberger is founder and president of The Future of Freedom Foundation.

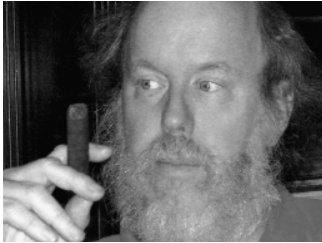
NEXT MONTH:
**“The Tyranny of
Immigration Controls”**
by Jacob G. Hornberger

For any lawful purpose — either of business or amusement — the citizen is at perfect liberty to carry his gun. It is the wicked purpose — and the mischievous result — which essentially constitute the crime. He shall not carry about this or any other weapon of death to terrify or alarm, and in such manner as naturally terrify and alarm, a peaceful people.

— North Carolina Supreme Court

Trump and the Right to #Resist

by James Bovard



Since Donald Trump's election, it has become fashionable for his opponents to use a #Resist hashtag on their social media postings. Public demonstrations have become more fashionable than at any time since the Vietnam War. Federal agencies are actively working to thwart the Trump administration; the Obama holdover chief of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau even refused to vacate her office for a Trump appointee. Government employees are avidly leaking documents to the *Washington Post* and other papers in a way probably never seen before in American history.

Despite such efforts, Trump remains president. Barring death, resignation, impeachment, or Twenty-Fifth Amendment removal, he will

continue in the White House until 2020. The controversies around his power should spur Americans to ask fundamental questions about what they owe to Washington.

For generations, politicians have talked as if citizens are obliged both to revere and obey their government. But there are few things more dangerous than swallowing the notion that government is entitled to boundless obedience. Throughout history, governments have occasionally overstepped the bounds of their legitimate power. What should be done when government betrays its promises?

John Locke's work *Two Treatises of Government* was written in the 1680s, when Englishmen were chafing under the growing tyranny of the Stuart kings. Locke aimed to awaken people to the danger of servile doctrines that the monarchy was promoting. He wrote,

That subjects, or foreigners attempting by force on the properties of any people, may be resisted with force, is agreed on all hands. But that magistrates doing the same thing, may be resisted, hath of late been denied: as if those who had the greatest privileges and advantages by the law, had

thereby a power to break those laws, by which alone they were set in a better place than their brethren.

Locke helped Englishmen recognize the folly of presuming that the ruler's power was on a moral high ground compared with anyone else who assaulted them:

Should a Robber break into my House, and with a Dagger at my Throat, make me seal Deeds to convey my Estate to him, would this give him any title? Just such a title by his Sword, has an unjust Conqueror, who forces me into Submission. The injury and the Crime is equal, whether committed by the wearer of a Crown, or some petty villain. The title of the offender, and the number of his Followers make no difference in the Offence, unless it be to aggravate it.

Locke had a profound impact on the Founding Fathers, and his doctrines resonate in the Declaration of Independence and many other documents in the 1770s and 1780s. Locke's treatises on government helped Americans recognize that no concept of sovereignty can justify

extending government power beyond the bounds of political right.

Once ideas and principles consecrating unlimited power are accepted, it is only a matter of time until that power is used in ways that shock those who acquiesced to its expansion. As Sen. John Taylor of Caroline, observed in 1821, "Tyranny in form is the first step towards tyranny in substance."

"Tyranny in form is the first step towards tyranny in substance."

It is absurd to expect governments to descend into barbarism gradually, step by step — as if there were a train schedule to political hell and people could get off at any stop along the way. People forget how quickly the forms of political power can turn civilized behavior into unrestrained pillage and mass violence. Most people strolling the streets of German towns in the late 1920s would never have suspected that, within two decades, the government would launch a policy of genocide. Similarly, someone visiting Moscow in 1913 or Phnom Penh in 1969 would probably not have seen the barbarity just around the bend. Politicians rarely give formal warnings of how they intend to abuse the power they acquire.

History is replete with tyrannical governments that deserved to be destroyed by their victims. At what point can we say that a government has placed itself in a state of war with the citizenry? By what standard or measure can people know when they have a right to forcibly resist illegitimate power? In Bosnia, in Rwanda, or in other areas where mass murders have recently occurred, the citizen obviously may use as much deadly force as necessary to prevent himself and his family from being slaughtered by rampaging government forces or by murderous private mobs acting with government sanction. And in the United States, blacks clearly had a right to peacefully resist segregationist laws in the 1950s and 1960s and had a right to violently resist attacks on them by sheriffs and private citizens.

Trump, like recent presidents commanding armies of enforcement agents, is a threat to our rights and liberties.

Unfortunately, there is no lucid standard by which a citizen can know precisely when he must cease obeying. And, regrettably, much of the media, like the Anglican Church in the 1680s, will preach the duty of

passive resistance all the way to the entrance of the political slaughterhouse. Indeed, there was perhaps almost nothing that Barack Obama could have done that would have allowed the media the same right of resistance that many pundits trumpeted after the 2016 election.

Parlor talk

Trump, like recent presidents commanding armies of enforcement agents with sweeping prerogatives, is a threat to our rights and liberties. His comments in a New York speech in July endorsing the roughing up arrestees by police were appalling by any standard. Luckily, his blather cannot negate local, state, and federal laws against such abuses. On the other hand, Attorney General Jeff Sessions's campaign to revive the drug war and asset forfeiture poses a far more direct peril.

But there is a paradox in the anti-Trump "resistance." Many of the liberals who are most vehemently opposed to Trump also support government confiscation of private firearms. Perhaps they believe that as long as they still have their Twitter hashtags, their rights will be safe from government oppression.

But discussions of political right are mere parlor talk unless citizens

have a right to resist tyranny. The New Hampshire Bill of Rights, written in 1784, declared, “The doctrine of nonresistance against arbitrary power, and oppression, is absurd, slavish, and destructive of the good and happiness of mankind.” Yet much of the political and academic establishment shudders at even considering the right to resist.

Many Trump opponents are not opposed to dictators per se; they simply want different dictates.

But as Joyce Lee Malcolm showed in her 1994 book, *To Keep and Bear Arms: The Origins of an Anglo-American Right*, the Second Amendment was based on recognition that people had the right to possess the means to resist government tyranny. Discussions on federal gun-control measures often focus on whether specific guns serve “sporting purposes.”

Another paradox of the Trump opposition is that many of them seem most angry about the president’s policies that reduce federal power. Many Trump opponents are not opposed to dictators per se; they simply want different dictates. Trump was widely denounced because his Justice Department refuses to compel every public school in

the nation to make special bathroom and locker-room accommodations for self-proclaimed transgender kids. But the Constitution did not grant the federal government jurisdiction over “gender identity.”

But it is possible that Trump will do things in the future that will enrage even Americans who favor a much smaller role for government. The most likely provocation would be pushing the United States into an unnecessary war against Iran, North Korea, or some other designated foreign villain.

If that happens, the #Resist movement could instantly become far more powerful — if enough Americans recognize the folly and peril. In such a case, citizens should begin by realizing how much leverage they have to bring government to its knees. At the height of the Vietnam War protests, fewer than 5 percent of the American public were actively protesting the War, yet those protests psychologically paralyzed the Johnson administration and played a role in the Nixon administration’s war against dissent that led to Watergate.

In the final realm, the power of the Trump administration will be limited by the character strength of the American people. If the citizens

have self-respect and courage — and the means to defend their rights — government abuses will eventually be curbed.

Intelligent, targeted, decisive protests can puncture the sense of legitimacy that cossets both Leviathan's commanders and employees. And once the government's aura of legitimacy is shattered, the "transaction costs" of oppressive policies skyrocket. Each person who understands his rights and liberties is another barrier against the wrongful expansion of government power. As 16th-century French philosopher Etienne de la Boétie observed, "It is the inhabitants themselves who permit, or, rather, bring about their own subjection, since by ceasing to submit they would put an end to their servitude."

It remains to be seen whether the #Resist movement will result in any increase in political savvy among the American people. As Benjamin Constant wrote in 1815,

"It is in fact the degree of force, not its holders, which must be denounced.... There are weights too heavy for the hand of man." Unfortunately, many Trump opponents will never make an adverse inference against arbitrary power because they seek to put government itself back on a pedestal.

James Bovard is a policy advisor to The Future of Freedom Foundation and is the author of a new ebook, Freedom Frauds: Hard Lessons in American Liberty, published by FFF, Public Policy Hooligan, Attention Deficit Democracy, and eight other books

NEXT MONTH:
**"The Bundy Ranch Case
Explains Westerners' Distrust
of Washington"**
by James Bovard

It was from America that the plain ideas that men ought to mind their business, and that the nation is responsible to Heaven for the acts of the State — ideas long locked in the breast of solitary thinkers, and hidden among Latin folios — burst forth like a conqueror upon the world they were destined to transform, under the title of the Rights of Man ... and the principle gained ground, that a nation can never abandon its fate to an authority it cannot control.

— Lord Acton

A Complete and Utter Failure

by *Laurence M. Vance*



President Trump has now completed his first year in office. The Republican majorities in the U.S. House and Senate have now had a year to work with a Republican president. What is so significant about that is that it is only the fourth time since the end of World War II and the end of absolute Democratic control of the federal government under Franklin Delano Roosevelt that the Republican Party itself obtained absolute control of the government.

Republican control

Absolute Republican control first occurred with the 83rd Congress during the first two years of Dwight Eisenhower's presidency (1953–1955). After that, Republicans did not control even one house

of Congress until 1981. Absolute Republican control next happened when Republicans had a majority in Congress for more than four years under George W. Bush. At the time of Bush's inauguration in January 2001, the Republicans effectively controlled both houses of the 107th Congress. Although the composition of the Senate was tied at 50 Democrats and 50 Republicans, Dick Cheney, the vice president and president of the Senate, was able to cast a tie-breaking vote (which he did eight times during his tenure as vice president), effectively giving Republicans control of the Senate. Republicans maintained their control of the government until May 24, 2001, when Republican Sen. Jim Jeffords of Vermont switched from Republican to Independent and began caucusing with the Democrats, thus ending Republican control of the Senate. Republicans regained control of the Senate in the 2002 midterm elections, and then remained in control of both Houses of Congress until their defeat in the 2006 midterm elections.

In addition to that, there were a few times in which the Republicans almost had total control of the government; that is, they controlled two-thirds of it: either the presidency and one house of Congress or

both houses of Congress without the presidency. The 80th Congress of 1947–1949, which met during the second half of the first term of the Democratic president Harry Truman, was solidly Republican in the House and Senate. The Republicans had a majority in the Senate during the Republican president Ronald Reagan’s first six years in office. During the last six years of Democrat Bill Clinton’s presidency, the Republicans had majorities in both houses of Congress. When the Republicans temporarily lost their majority in the Senate under George W. Bush, they still controlled two-thirds of the government. The 114th Congress of 2015–2017, which met during Barack Obama’s last two years in office, had Republican majorities in both houses of Congress.

So why does it matter if the Republicans have absolute or majority control of the federal government instead of the Democrats? The socialist and statist policies of the Democratic Party are well known. It is the party of liberalism, socialism, progressivism, paternalism, economic egalitarianism, collectivism, taxpayer-funded abortion, organized labor, big government, environmentalism, affirmative action, welfare, taxing and spending,

income-transfer programs, and wealth-redistribution schemes. The Democratic solution to every problem is invariably more government or more government intervention.

The Democratic solution to every problem is invariably more government or more government intervention.

The Republicans claim to be different. At election time they all maintain how conservative they are, and how dedicated they are to the Constitution, limited government, individual freedom, private property, traditional values, free enterprise, free trade, and a strong national defense.

The GOP platform

The most recent Republican Party platform was adopted at the party’s convention in Cleveland in 2016. The Constitution is frequently mentioned in their platform as the Republicans’ authority:

We believe the Constitution was written not as a flexible document, but as our enduring covenant. We believe our constitutional system — limited government, separation of powers, federalism, and the

rights of the people — must be preserved uncompromised for future generations.

We are also the party of the Constitution, the greatest political document ever written. It is the solemn compact built upon principles of the Declaration that enshrines our God-given individual rights and ensures that all Americans stand equal before the law, defines the purposes and limits of government, and is the blueprint for ordered liberty that makes the United States the world's freest and most prosperous nation.

We reaffirm the Constitution's fundamental principles: limited government, separation of powers, individual liberty, and the rule of law.

We affirm that all legislation, regulation, and official actions must conform to the Constitution's original meaning as understood at the time the language was adopted.

The Republican platform adamantly supports federalism:

Federalism is a cornerstone of our constitutional system. Every violation of state sov-

eighty by federal officials is not merely a transgression of one unit of government against another; it is an assault on the liberties of individual Americans.

The Constitution gives the federal government very few powers, and they are specifically enumerated; the states and the people retain authority over all unenumerated powers.

We pledge to restore the proper balance and vertical separation of powers between the federal government and state governments — the governments closest to, and most reflective of, the American people.

First Amendment rights “are not given to us by the government but are rights we inherently possess.”

The Republican platform continually emphasizes that the U.S. government should be subservient to the American people:

The legitimate powers of government are rooted in the consent of the American people.

We believe that people are the ultimate resource — and

that the people, not the government, are the best stewards of our country's God-given natural resources.

We pledge to make government work for the people, rather than the other way around.

The Republican platform maintains that “in a free society, the primary role of government is to protect the God-given, inalienable rights of its citizens.” Americans’ First Amendment rights “are not given to us by the government but are rights we inherently possess.” The Republican platform recognizes the overreach of the federal government and calls for a more limited government:

Much of what the federal government does can be improved, much should be replaced, and much needs to be done away with or returned to the states. It is long past time for just tinkering around the edges of a bloated and unresponsive bureaucratic state.

We call for renewed efforts to reduce, rather than expand, government responsibilities, and we urge particular attention to the bloated public rela-

tions budgets of the departments and agencies. The federal government spends too much of the people's money telling the people what they should do.

All of this might be almost just enough to make constitutionalists and liberty-minded individuals want to join the Republican Party.

I said “almost.”

There is only one way to describe the past year of Republican rule: a complete and utter failure.

The reality is that no matter how many times Republicans recite their conservative mantra and mention the Constitution, federalism, the people, natural rights, and limited government in their platform, their actions show that they don't believe a word of what they're saying or writing.

Past Republican failures

There is only one way to describe the past year of Republican rule: a complete and utter failure. But anyone who ignored the libertarian rhetoric spouted by Republicans and instead paid attention to what they actually did when they had absolute or majority control of

the federal government knew that “this time” would be no different from “last time.”

When Republicans controlled the Senate under Ronald Reagan they never even tried to repeal Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society.

The Republican majority in Congress for the first time since the New Deal could have blocked the legislative agenda of Harry Truman. It didn’t. It authorized millions in aid for Greece and billions for the Marshall Plan. And Americans are still suffering from the negative consequences of the National Security Act of 1947 that reorganized the military and established the National Security Council (NSC) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

If ever the New Deal could have been repealed in its entirety, it was when the Republicans had absolute control of the government under Dwight Eisenhower. They, of course, failed to do anything. And even if the Republicans in Congress had tried to do something, it would have been squelched by Eisenhower, who wrote in a 1954 letter,

Now it is true that I believe this country is following a dangerous trend when it permits too

great a degree of centralization of governmental functions. I oppose this — in some instances the fight is a rather desperate one. But to attain any success it is quite clear that the Federal government cannot avoid or escape responsibilities which the mass of the people firmly believe should be undertaken by it. The political processes of our country are such that if a rule of reason is not applied in this effort, we will lose everything — even to a possible and drastic change in the Constitution. This is what I mean by my constant insistence upon “moderation” in government. Should any political party attempt to abolish social security, unemployment insurance, and eliminate labor laws and farm programs, you would not hear of that party again in our political history. There is a tiny splinter group, of course, that believes you can do these things. Among them are H.L. Hunt (you possibly know his background), a few other Texas oil millionaires, and an occasional politician or business man from other areas. Their number is negligible and they are stupid.

When Republicans controlled the Senate for six years under Ronald Reagan they never even tried to repeal Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. Instead, the budget increased, the deficit exploded, the national debt expanded, the drug war enlarged, and Social Security and Medicare tax rates were raised.

When Republicans had majorities in the House and Senate during Barack Obama's second term, they increased federal spending.

When the Republicans controlled both houses of Congress for six years under Bill Clinton, federal spending went up every year and the national debt increased by \$1.4 trillion. Republicans expanded the welfare state by increasing the refundable Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) every year and creating the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) to provide federally funded health insurance to children in families with incomes too high to qualify for Medicaid. Republicans also overwhelmingly supported the Iraq Liberation Act that declared it was U.S. policy to support "regime change" in Iraq. No attempt was ever made to eliminate a significant government program or agency. Instead, all we

heard was whining about the need for a Republican in the White House so Republicans could finish the revolution that wasn't.

When the Republicans finally got their Republican president in George W. Bush they had a perfect opportunity to end the welfare state and return the country to the limited government envisioned by the Framers. Yet, the damage done by Republicans when they had absolute control of the government is incalculable: the arcane Sarbanes-Oxley Act, the creation of the monstrous Department of Homeland Security, the nationalization of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, federal bailouts, increased farm subsidies, and increased foreign aid; free-speech zones and other infringements on civil liberties, the draconian USA PATRIOT ACT, and the repulsive TSA; the Combat Methamphetamine Epidemic Act that made criminals out of Americans who wanted to purchase Sudafed for their stuffy noses; the No Child Left Behind Act that further federalized local public schools, almost doubling the budget and the national debt and tremendously expanding the budget of the Department of Education; endless wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, skyrocketing congressional spending, assassina-

tions, torture, and drone strikes that regularly missed their targets; and illegal surveillance of American citizens. And then there is the Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act, the largest expansion of the welfare state since Lyndon Johnson.

When Republicans once again had majorities in the House and Senate during the last two years of Barack Obama's second term, they not only failed to balance the budget, they increased federal spending so much that the national debt climbed to almost \$20 trillion. And yet, the Republicans wasted their time sending Obama bills to repeal Obamacare, even though there was no way that Obama would ever approve legislation to repeal his signature health-care law.

Recent failures

And now, after one year under Donald Trump, with absolute control of the government, the Republicans have once again proved to be a complete and utter failure. I cite but seven examples.

Republicans have completely and utterly failed to repeal Obamacare. They could have had a bill already drafted to repeal Obamacare and put it on Trump's desk his first day in office. It could have been just

a one-sentence bill: "The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PL 111-148, 124 Stat. 119 through 124 Stat. 1025) is hereby repealed."

Republicans have completely and utterly failed to end the welfare state.

Republicans have completely and utterly failed to cut federal spending. They envision a budget of more than \$4 trillion for the next fiscal year, with increases every year after that. And they don't even profess to have a balanced budget until 10 years into the future. The national debt has increased by more than half a trillion dollars over the past year.

Republicans have completely and utterly failed to end the welfare state. There are in the United States about 80 means-tested welfare programs that limit benefits or payments on the basis of the beneficiary's income or assets. Well-known programs such as Medicaid; the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP); the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP [formerly known as food stamps]); Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF); Head Start; Healthy Start; school

breakfast and lunch programs; Section 8 housing vouchers; Supplemental Security Income (SSI); and the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) are still intact. As are welfare programs that most Americans have never heard of, such as the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) and the Special Milk Program (SMP), and welfare programs that most Americans don't consider to be welfare, such as Social Security, Medicare, refundable tax credits, farm subsidies, and unemployment compensation.

Republicans have completely and utterly failed to end the warfare state. There has been no change to U.S. foreign policy. The U.S. empire is still intact. Hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops are still stationed overseas. Hundreds of foreign military bases are still open. The United States is still bombing and intervening in other countries. Drone strikes have gone up more than 400 percent since Trump took office. Yet, Republicans are salivating over his call for a higher defense budget.

Republicans have completely and utterly failed to abolish the TSA. It is bad enough that the federal government provides security for private businesses; it is even

worse when TSA agents routinely steal from passengers; inappropriately grope them; and fail to detect mock knives, guns, and explosives in undercover security tests.

Republicans have completely and utterly failed to end the warfare state.

Republicans have completely and utterly failed to end federal control over local education. The federal Department of Education, which Republicans at one time pledged to abolish, is still in existence even though Republicans say in their platform that the Constitution gives the federal government “no role in education.”

Republicans have completely and utterly failed to reduce the size and scope of the federal government. Not only are the 15 large departments still intact, the federal government also operates hundreds of agencies, bureaus, corporations, commissions, administrations, authorities, and boards. Most of them should be completely and permanently shut down, their funding and activities ended, all of their assets sold, and all of their bureaucrats laid off.

It doesn't matter whether Republicans have absolute control of

the government with a Republican president (Eisenhower, the younger Bush, Trump), whether they have a majority in both Houses of Congress under a Democratic president (Truman, Clinton, Obama), whether they control just the Senate under a Republican president (Reagan), whether they control just the House under a Republican president (the younger Bush), whether they control just the House under a Democratic president (Obama), or even whether they are in the minority in Congress under a Democratic president (Truman, Kennedy, Johnson, Carter, Clinton, Obama) or a Republican president (Nixon, Ford, Reagan, both Bushes). The result is the same: a complete and utter failure to do anything to limit the size and scope of the federal government.

The Republican fraud

The federal government is a bloated, invasive, intrusive, destructive monstrosity that is out of control. We have a welfare state that Lyndon Johnson could only have dreamed of. We have a warfare state that bombs, maims, and kills; makes terrorists, widows, and orphans; and enriches the military-industrial complex. We have massive government intervention in the

economy and society. The Constitution is violated on a daily basis. We live in a growing police state that is anything but a free society. We have more government, more government debt, more government spending, more government regulations, and more government tyranny at all levels of government than ever before. Yet, since the so-called Republican revolution of the 1990s, we have had more Republicans elected to office on the federal, state, and local levels since Reconstruction. The Republican majority in the U.S. House is the largest in recent memory. The Deep South has only two Democratic senators in Congress. In a majority of the states, Republicans control both houses of the legislature or both houses of the legislature and the governorship.

The federal government is a bloated, invasive, intrusive, destructive monstrosity that is out of control.

Why would anyone possibly even begin to think that the Republicans would ever do anything significant to restore individual liberty and property rights; abolish government agencies and regulations; cut the budget, spending, and the

debt; or end federal tyranny at home and abroad? Republicans generally oppose only the most egregious outrages and comical instances of federal spending.

The only difference between Republicans and Democrats is that the Republicans talk about the Constitution, the free market, and limited government while ignoring the Constitution, the free market, and limited government. The only limited government they seek is a government limited to control by Republicans.

After the Republican majority in Congress made a deal with the Democrats in April 2017 to fund the federal government through the end of fiscal year 2017 (September 30), Vice President Mike Pence called *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, where he was asked by the host, “If this is what happens, Mr. Vice President, why vote Republican? What

is the point of voting Republican if the Democrats are gonna continue to win practically 95 percent of their objectives, such as in this last budget deal?”

My point exactly.

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NEXT MONTH:
**“Dress Codes, Discrimination,
and a Free Society”**
by Laurence M. Vance

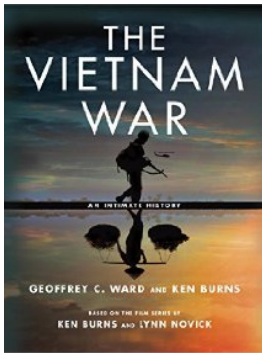
World leadership requires that we constantly defend the principles of individual liberty and free enterprise. At every opportunity we should call out to the world that only competitive enterprise can lead to peace and prosperity. We have a glorious history of individual freedom and safety of property — the absence of nationalization and confiscation by an omnipotent state. Our recent excursions toward the Welfare State endanger our record — and ourselves. But if we will correct that trend, then with pride we can demonstrate to the warring world that individual liberty is the only durable foundation for peace and prosperity.

— Hans F. Sennholz

What Ken Burns Left Out of the Vietnam Story

by Gareth Porter

The Vietnam War: An Intimate History by Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns (Knopf, 2017; 640 pages)



The companion coffee-table book to the 10-part PBS series by Ken Burns, *The Vietnam War*, is so closely tied to the series that it's left ambiguous whether Ken Burns himself is the co-author or not. Burns is shown as the second author on the dust jacket but not on the title page itself.

Book and series are clearly aimed at dominating the popular consciousness about the history of the war. Weighing in at nearly 600 glossy oversized pages, the book is

vast in scope, starting with the French colonization of Indochina and the Communist-led struggle against the French and taking the reader through each phase of the War. Like the series, the written version is rich in arresting details, especially about the War's major battles.

But when it comes to the question that should still trouble Americans — how and why the United States went to war in Vietnam in the first place — the book reflects the failings of the series. Instead of citing the documentary record that by now sheds harsh light on this fundamental issue, author Geoffrey C. Ward trots out the standard myths.

According to Ward, the conflict was “begun in good faith by decent people out of fateful misunderstandings, American overconfidence, and cold war miscalculation.” To support that claim, Ward relies on Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara's later explanation that the problem was a misperception of the threat from the communist world: “I saw communism as monolithic,” McNamara is quoted as saying. “I believed the Soviets and the Chinese were cooperating in trying to extend their hegemony.” In addition, the former Defense secretary claims he believed, “The communist movement in Vietnam

was closely related to guerrilla insurgencies in Burma, Indonesia, Malaya and the Philippines” and that those were “signs of a unified communist drive for hegemony in Asia.”

But McNamara’s claims about what he and other senior officials in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations believed are contradicted by the internal U.S. documents now available. Those documents show that, by early 1962 — a few years before the big troop commitment in Vietnam — McNamara and others were acutely aware that communism was not at all monolithic. They knew full well that the split between China and the Soviet Union was very serious and could be exploited by the United States in Southeast Asia.

The Domino Theory

Ward asserts that it was the “Domino Theory” — that image of one domino falling and causing each one in the row to fall, as a vivid metaphor for the loss of a whole series of Southeast Asian states to communism if Vietnam was lost — that propelled the United States into the War. But official papers and memoirs reveal that Dwight Eisenhower had ceased to believe that as early as 1953. Eisenhower pro-

pounded the falling-domino image in 1954 only for the purpose of convincing the Russians and Chinese that the United States was preparing to intervene militarily to save the French war against the Viet Minh. So the theory originated in a conscious deception rather than an unconscious misperception.

The Central Intelligence Agency had explicitly rejected the Domino Theory for years.

Moreover, the Central Intelligence Agency had explicitly rejected the Domino Theory for years, and had reiterated its conclusion in an intelligence estimate in March 1961. In June 1964, at the request of Lyndon Johnson, the CIA had rejected even more decisively the idea that failing to defeat the communist insurgency in South Vietnam would result in the toppling of the Southeast Asian dominoes. What the CIA said was likely to occur instead was that the United States would face a rise of neutralism in the region, especially in Thailand, where U.S. military airbases threatened China.

McNamara and other senior advisors cited precisely the threat of neutralism in meetings in late 1964 and mid 1965 as the main reason

for rejecting the option of a negotiated withdrawal from South Vietnam. The refusal to negotiate reflected the policy of surrounding and threatening China with military allies, which might well have become untenable if Thailand and the Philippines went neutral.

The insistence on continuing the Cold War in East Asia was not the only political-military consideration pushing the United States toward war in Vietnam. Another consideration was the belief of the Joint Chiefs of Staff that having combat troops in South Vietnam would strengthen their case for a substantial increase in the military budget, as they informed Lawrence Korb (who later became a Pentagon official during the Reagan administration), who was interviewing them for his doctoral dissertation in the late 1960s.

The United States itself determined the fate of those elections.

The fate of the 1954 Geneva Agreement's provision for an election to reunite Vietnam in 1956 certainly deserves some space in Ward's very long history. The author makes it clear that Vietnamese Communist leader, Ho Chi Minh, who had led

the defeat of French colonialism in the country, would win any honestly held election in a landslide. But the only explanation in the book for the failure to hold the elections is that the South Vietnamese government under Ngo Dinh Diem had become strong enough by 1955 to refuse to participate. That claim comes in a six-page essay by historian Edward Miller, who refers only to "the proposed elections," as if they had not been legally binding on the government in the South that had taken over legally from the French colonial power.

What actually occurred, however, was that the United States itself determined the fate of those elections. In mid 1955, Diem was completely dependent on the economic and military support of the United States and could not afford to adopt a policy without U.S. approval. And as late as mid June 1955, the Eisenhower administration was still committed to free elections to unify Vietnam, in order to be consistent with its policy of holding free elections in other divided Cold War states, i.e. Germany and Korea. The Diem government had still not ruled out free elections, privately or publicly. Then on June 14, 1955, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles adopted a new policy that quietly ap-

proved a completely different policy of opposing the Geneva Elections. Diem quickly fell in line and refused to participate in consultations with North Vietnam on those elections.

Westmoreland had adopted a policy of treating civilians like armed combatants.

Contrary to the conventional version of the story, then, it was Secretary of State Dulles, not Diem, who killed the best chance the United States would have for averting a violent resolution of the division of Vietnam. Had Ho Chi Minh's government taken over a unified Vietnam, there would have been no Vietnam War. Ho's socialist government would have been open to economic relations with the United States, since it would have viewed the United States as a counterweight to domination by China, just as it had seen such relations as a counterweight to the return of the French in 1945 — and just as it has done more recently since the end of the Cold War.

War on civilians

Ward does not blink at the fact that the U.S. war in Vietnam exhibited little concern for the lives of Vietnamese civilians. What he fails

to mention is that the indiscriminate killing of civilians was consistent with the U.S. war strategy rather than a violation of it.

The author devotes considerable space to the U.S. massacre at My Lai, including a color picture of a large group of women, children, and even infants who had been shot at close range. But he repeats the conventional view that the atrocity was the result of individual officers acting on their own, and that the official policy did not permit killing civilians in Vietnam. He cites the investigation and subsequent indictment of 30 officers by Gen. William R. Peers “and the Peers Commission,” as *prima facie* evidence that the atrocities were a violation of command policy.

But a very substantial body of evidence shows otherwise. The U.S. commander in Vietnam, Gen. William Westmoreland, had indeed adopted a policy of treating civilians like armed combatants if they were living in areas under long-term control by the Viet Cong (as the Communist-led Vietnamese combatants were called). That policy was embodied in the establishment of “free fire zones” — a term that was frequently used during the War and is discussed prominently in the literature on the War but is strange-

ly absent from *The Vietnam War*. “Free fire zones” — later renamed “specified strike zones” — were large areas of the countryside in which bombing and shelling could be carried out without obtaining permission from higher echelons of the U.S. military or the Vietnamese government, on the official assumption that any population remaining was the enemy.

The author’s desire to avoid ultimate judgments on the war won’t heal the rift between the two views.

The Peers Commission sought to clear Westmoreland himself of culpability for My Lai, referring in its report to directives from his Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) that required U.S. soldiers to “minimize noncombatant casualties and civilian property damage.” But General Peers was deliberately misleading the public to protect his superior officer. The full text of MACV Directive 525-3 of September 1965 makes it clear that such protections for civilians applied only to populated areas where the Communist forces had either temporary control or no control at all. But areas under long-term Viet Cong control represented more

than 40 percent of the rural Vietnamese population, according to McNamara’s estimate before the major U.S. troop commitment began.

In fact, Westmoreland himself stated his policy quite explicitly in his own memoirs. Once a free fire zone was established, he wrote, “anybody who remained had to be considered enemy combatants,” and operations in those areas “could be conducted without fear of civilian casualties.” Those were precisely the instructions given to troops sent into My Lai.

In 1968, journalist Jonathan Schell published a detailed account of the systematic destruction of most of the populated districts of Quang Ngai, the province in which My Lai was located, primarily through systematic attacks on villages by U.S. fighter-bombers. The destroyed villages were in Viet Cong base areas that had been declared free fire zones after dropping leaflets warning the population that they would be destroyed for having harbored or aided the Viet Cong. Schell’s account is not mentioned by Ward.

Indiscriminate targeting of civilian areas and “collective punishment” of the civilian population for support for or assistance to combat-

ants are clear violations of the laws of war. But Ward doesn't even focus on the use of U.S. air power in South Vietnam apart from close air support in ground battles, much less acknowledge that the U.S. military bears responsibility for war crimes.

The author's desire to avoid ultimate judgments on the War won't heal the rift between the two views of Vietnam held by the Vietnam War generations. And especially in light of unending and unpopular U.S. wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere in the greater Middle

East, both Ward's book and the Ken Burns series that it reflects have missed an opportunity to help Americans understand why such wars are a recurring theme in recent American history.

Gareth Porter is an award-winning investigative journalist whose books include Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam (University of California Press, 2005).

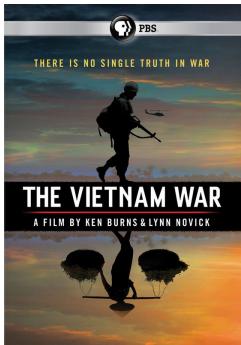
Immediate necessity makes many things convenient, which if continued would grow into oppressions. Expedience and right are different things.... When we are planning for posterity, we ought to remember that virtue is not hereditary.

— Thomas Paine

A Safe Space to Watch a War

by Michael Swanson

The Vietnam War by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick (PBS, 2017) DVD.



The documentary television event of 2017 was the 10-part PBS series titled *The Vietnam War*, directed by both Ken Burns and Lynn Novick. The series took 10 years and more than \$30 million to make. Released last September, it garnered rave reviews all over the mainstream media and became the second-highest-rated TV series by Ken Burns in the past two decades. An average of 6.7 million people watched every episode and in total the series reached 34 million people. In fact the first episode became the most streamed show by PBS in the entire history of the network.

This was not the first time PBS tackled the Vietnam War. In 1983 Stanley Karnow served as chief correspondent to a 13-hour PBS series titled *Vietnam: A Television History*, which had interviews with dozens of high-level participants in the War, including Col. Edward Lansdale, who helped to create the Ngo Dinh Diem regime in South Vietnam. This series was tied to Karnow's book on the War titled *Vietnam: A History*, which became the standard work of history on the topic. I'm working on a history of the War myself and have found uncut interviews from the Karnow series a great resource with tidbits not available in books. That series, though, generated a conservative outcry that caused some PBS stations to air an hour-long rebuttal by Charlton Heston produced by Accuracy in Media, which argued that it downplayed the threat of international communism. At the time, the Cold War was still on and the Soviet Union had yet to fall.

Ken Burns has bragged that he avoided any such controversy by getting funding from sources across the political spectrum, from David Koch to the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and corporations such as Bank of America. "That's a way of telling people, 'You can re-

sheath your knives,” he told the *New York Times*.

For Stanley Karnow the War was a major part of his life, for he worked as a reporter in Vietnam. Burns and Novick did not and were teenagers during the 1960s. That gives them a bit of a different perspective on the War and perhaps is a reason they have a different agenda. That is shown in the opening prologue, when the narrator declares that the War was “begun in good faith, by decent people.” Burns explained to the *Washington Post* that he had no interest in getting into the debates over the War. There are people today who think that the War could have been won and others who think it was a huge mistake and that it could never have been won.

“The seeds of disunion we experience today, the lack of civil discourse all had their seeds in Vietnam.”

Instead of using their series to try to answer questions about the War itself, Burns and Novick hope that they can bring people together with it in a time in which the nation feels as though it is growing more divided. As a *Washington Post* reporter explained, Burns

isn’t blind to the fact that the atomization of the Internet, the loss of trust in any unifying source of truth, and a cynicism that verges on paranoia make it harder for any one person to gather a mass audience, much less to sell them on a single idea about America. But Burns believes fiercely that his audience hasn’t given up on the desire for community and reconciliation. His mission with ‘The Vietnam War’ is to create a different kind of public space, where people with very different views and perspectives can have a shared experience.

“The seeds of disunion we experience today, the polarization, the lack of civil discourse all had their seeds in Vietnam,” Burns told the *New York Times*. “I can’t imagine a better way to help pull out some of the fuel rods that create this radioactive atmosphere than to talk about Vietnam in a calm way.”

No one is to blame.

The series sought to do that by focusing on the experiences of soldiers who served in Vietnam, including some from North Vietnam and the Republic of Vietnam in the

South, and a few figures in the anti-war movements, instead of policy-makers and historians. The series shows suffering on all sides of the War. It was a war of many atrocities and whenever one is mentioned in an episode it quickly shifts to talk about one committed by the other side in order to equalize any blame and simply make war itself bad.

That creates a safe space for the viewer by avoiding any controversy. “Today, we suffer from too much certainty,” Burns said. “I like the middle, the uncertainty of things. I think that’s where all the progress, all the healing, takes place.” In other words a person watching the series in his home can do so with the knowledge that millions of others of people are watching it at the same time he is too, many of whom may have voted for a different candidate in the last presidential election, but all who are watching are united in watching and seeing the suffering of the War.

The 10-part series is really structured into two parts. The first part is episodes one through five, which depict the growing American involvement in the war, from support of the French colonial war to John Kennedy’s support of the Diem regime and Lyndon Johnson’s decision to send more than half a

million combat troops to South Vietnam and engage in a mass bombing campaign of North Vietnam.

From a historical standpoint I found those episodes to be very problematic, to say the least. Many people have picked the episodes apart already, so I’m not going to go into too much detail. One good resource, though, are the articles by James DiEugenio about the series on his website, KennedysandKing.com. He found it amazing that the series did not mention the name John Foster Dulles and showed only an image or two of Colonel Lansdale, both of whom were key figures in the very creation of the government in South Vietnam. The series also simply skipped over the fact that Kennedy made plans to withdraw from Vietnam by just not talking about them at all.

The series simply skipped over the fact that Kennedy made plans to withdraw from Vietnam.

One problem I had is that Burns and Novick made it appear that Kennedy and Johnson made very few decisions on the War themselves, and thus it was practically inevitable. All they are shown doing is responding to events. A key mo-

ment in the escalation of the War was the so-called Gulf of Tonkin attacks of August 2 and 4 of 1964. The U.S. Navy destroyer USS *Maddox* was pursued by three small North Vietnamese torpedo boats during the first incident, with both sides exchanging fire with each other. South Vietnamese CIA-trained commandos had attacked a radar installation on Hon Me island shortly before this naval confrontation and the North Vietnamese mistakenly thought the *Maddox* was part of the commando attack.

They portray the Vietnam War as something beyond the control of Johnson and Kennedy so that no one can be blamed.

The second incident, on August 4, occurred when the *Maddox* and the USS *Turner Joy* were ordered to go inside the 12-nautical-mile territorial waters of North Vietnam to show the flag. Capt. John J. Herrick reported that he came under torpedo attack. Episode three of *The Vietnam War* shows this information being relayed to Johnson, who then decides to respond with air strikes and gets Congress to pass the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which gives him a blank check to intervene in Vietnam.

The Burns and Novick series presents Johnson as only reluctantly getting involved in Vietnam and being almost a passive responder to events. Today we know for certain that the second Gulf of Tonkin incident did not occur, because the National Security Agency released its account of the event based on message transcripts from both the forces of the United States and North Vietnam, which they intercepted. Just about every single book on the Vietnam War doubts that the second attack happened and shows that in fact Washington had reasons to suspect it didn't happen on that day. Captain Herrick, for instance, sent a message to his superiors that was passed on to McNamara saying that he doubted that the attack happened within a few hours of his first message. But the episode doesn't even mention this second message! It only reveals the first one. And then Herrick an hour later sent another message ignored by the series saying he didn't think the attack happened and recommending daylight reconnaissance to find out for sure.

In my view the series does not attempt to cover up the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, but the omissions show how far Burns and Novick went to portray the Vietnam War as

something beyond the control of Johnson and Kennedy so that no one can be blamed.

Disaster

The next few episodes depict a growing intervention in Vietnam and rightly show how it failed and led to disaster, even if they also are a bit misleading on the nature of the War itself.

The series was not designed to engage in any of the debates about the Vietnam War itself.

For instance the series talks about Lyndon Johnson's Rolling Thunder mass bombing campaign of North Vietnam and makes it appear that the War was primarily directed against it, which makes the War look clean, so to speak. But in reality there was mass bombing in South Vietnam directed at areas outside the control of the Republic of Vietnam. The problem is, that was most of the country. A result was that a mass of refugees flooded into Saigon and other cities, which doubled and tripled in size. A good source on this is the Nick Turse book *Kill Anything That Moves*. He quotes Westmoreland and other military leaders as saying that the migration could drain the people away from

the Vietcong insurgency and help the United States win. It didn't work. The War was much worse for civilians than this TV series shows.

The first episodes of the series lead to what it really seems to want to talk about, and that is the divisions that grew inside the United States over the Vietnam War as it went on. After the first four episodes there is more and more mention of those divisions in each successive episode until they culminate in the Kent State shooting of May 4, 1970, in which 13 students were shot by Ohio National Guardsmen, with four students dying during demonstrations against Nixon's decision to expand the War into Cambodia. After that, the divisions over the War simply exploded, with the same American veterans who in previous episodes recounted their war experiences, now revealing their own involvement in demonstrations against the War, with some even throwing away their medals in protest.

I could not help but note that the series had zero sympathy for Richard Nixon in comparison with Johnson and Kennedy. Whereas the latter are depicted as merely reacting passively to events Nixon is shown making decisions not only to expand the war, but to attack demonstrators for political gain.

All together, the series makes the War look like an unfortunate accident and indeed in the final episode some of the commentators even say that. The series was not designed to engage in any of the debates about the Vietnam War itself, but instead appears to be made to avoid them in order to create the highest ratings possible. It in effect generated massive television ratings by pandering to its viewers by treating the Vietnam War almost the same way that most of the audience experienced the war on terror and witnessed the disasters in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Vietnam War series does a disservice to anyone who wants to understand the real causes of the events it depicts.

Most Americans today view those wars as mistakes and simply watched them unfold on their TV sets. They were told and many believe that the George W. Bush administration simply made mistakes when it decided to go to war in Iraq. It thought that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction and was posing a threat and so it intervened. In effect the viewers of the Burns and Novick series are essentially told that the Vietnam War

was not that much different. The human agency of John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson and their advisors, is stripped away in order to maintain that illusion in much the same way that the Bush administration has been portrayed as merely responding to threats instead of making decisions. By doing that *The Vietnam War* series does a disservice to anyone who wants to understand the real causes of the events it depicts.

All of that raises a question though. Does the Burns and Novick series succeed on its own terms? As far as providing a big hit it did indeed. But it seems very unlikely that it will bring people together as the directors hoped. For one thing today's political climate of disunity and partisanship did not really start with the Vietnam War or Richard Nixon. There was a Cold War panic over spies and communists in the early 1950s before Americans went to Vietnam with blacklists and loyalty oaths. There were labor riots during the Great Depression and race riots too before the 1960s. And Vietnam wasn't really the first controversial war the United States fought in, either. Mark Twain and others formed the Anti-Imperialism League to oppose the war the United States fought in the Philip-

piners. Woodrow Wilson even jailed people who were against American entry into World War I.

But more important, it is probably impossible to bring the American people together for long with a television event. Once the viewer is done with the final episode of the Burns and Novick series he is ready to change his television channel or streaming device to view another show. A portion of the viewers will head over to MSNBC to hear about the latest dope on the Russian scandal and Donald Trump, while others will go to Fox News to hear what a great leader he is.

In the end, what will bring people together is a recognition of shared values and an understanding that even if we disagree on this or that we are all consumers of media, much of which all too often is designed to scare and divide us. In

fact people were brought together for a period of time in support of the Vietnam War and the Iraq War, too, with propaganda and scare tactics, none of which could be recognized as such in this series. And it was done on TV, too. Lyndon Johnson's poll numbers skyrocketed the night he got on TV and announced that he was retaliating against the second Gulf of Tonkin attack. And he knew what he was doing, just as George W. Bush did. If we can't even ask what the real causes of events are, then we are doomed to repeat the "mistakes" of the past.

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