

5 September 2015

Dear Steve Sherman,

Thank you for your material and the invitation to join in your "pre-sponse" to the Ken Burns documentary. I have read through your draft and glanced at some of the books. I am afraid I must decline your invitation for several reasons.

For one thing, I am neither a Vietnam veteran nor a qualified scholar or person of influence in Vietnam studies. My participation in your project would do nothing to enhance its image and might possibly hurt it as there seem to be quite a few folks who simply don't like me for one reason or another. Moreover, your various partners are sufficiently knowledgeable to present your case forcefully. I cannot think of what I might add.

For some time now, I have given up on responding to other people's work. In my experience, few people actually listen to what I have to say, and my views and objectives are often misunderstood. *Losers Are Pirates* went only as far as the readers who were already receptive to the main idea, and some took it to places I did not intend. I don't think I earned any converts and I got absolutely no response from the producers of the *TV History* or Mr. Karnow. When Nguyen Ngoc Huy, a colleague of Stephen Young, asked my permission to translate the book into Vietnamese, I tried to discourage him, saying his efforts would be better employed writing a history of the war from a Vietnamese perspective. He did not listen but went ahead with his project. He died before it could be printed, so nothing ever came of it, but just think what valuable material might have been produced if he had not frittered away his time on that translation.

Despite Bill Laurie's gushing praise about its alleged importance, I no longer promote *Losers Are Pirates* (and whoever is still selling it is doing so without my permission). While the book contains some useful information, it frequently devolves into sarcasm and derision. I know, it's hard not to be sarcastic when talking about Stanley Karnow, but that's not good scholarship, and what was needed then was something more level-headed.

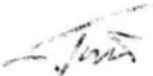
I wish I could share your colleagues' confidence regarding what went on in Vietnam and what it all means even today. After years of reading and hearing about the war from different angles, I find the whole thing exceedingly complex and the answers elusive. You might call it a historical fog of war. I do not take Ken Burns seriously. While you may fear his work will become the popular orthodoxy, I don't share that opinion. One program, no matter how widely propagated, does not by itself mold public opinion. There are many factors involved, a wide range of social and educational influences. I am not about to let myself get all worked up again about a TV show. As I see it, responding to all these films and books and articles is like swatting flies. You might get a few of them, but there are always more buzzing around and the more attention you give them the more you aggravate yourself.

All histories are distortions (hence the Vietnamese saying about winners being “kings” and losers being “pirates”). It is the rule rather than the exception, and it's not only left-wing academics who give a personal spin to the historical record. We can speculate as to what the Burns documentary will be like, but what's the point of guessing? You'll have to wait and see. For me, I have no plans to watch it (I don't watch TV anyway).

My advice to you is pretty much what I told Nguyen Ngoc Huy. After you view the Burns documentary, publish a sober, dispassionate essay laying out your major concerns, then be available for followup from whoever might be interested. But instead of massing all your strength to charge up the hill to win a single battle, I think you'd do better to spend your energies on the broader front of a comprehensive history – perhaps your own documentary (as, for example, a filmed lecture series presented by experts) – to encourage your audience to think and find the truth for themselves.

I hope this helps a little. Best of luck.

Regards,



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