

TELEVISION REVIEW

A Wave of Staggering Loss, in a Country Unprepared

By Neil Genzlinger

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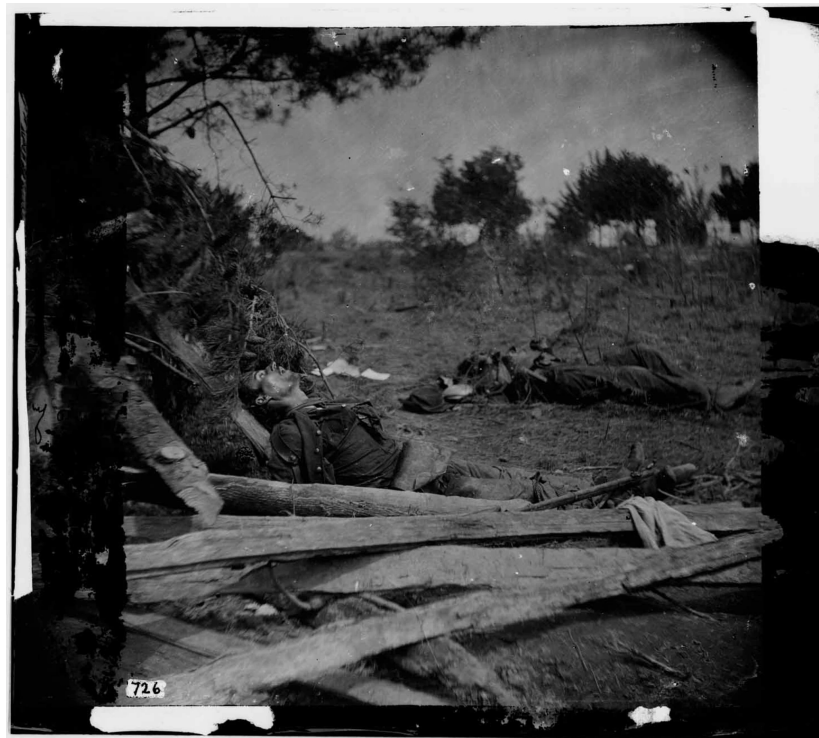
PBS's "American Experience" can feel formulaic, but the episode on Tuesday, "Death and the Civil War," makes itself wrenching and riveting by throwing out some of the formulas that have become familiar in documentaries about the war.

The program, written and directed by Ric Burns, focuses on one overwhelming fact of the Civil War that others bury in an avalanche of minutiae: An unprecedented number died during the four years of fighting.

There are no detailed maps of troop movements in Mr. Burns's treatment. The great generals show up only for cameos. Yes, actors give dramatic readings of letters, and the camera technique is straight out of "The Civil War," the breakthrough documentary on which Mr. Burns worked with Ken Burns, his brother. But unlike other such works, "Death and the Civil War" avoids the temptation to wander. It never loses focus on its sobering subject.

In one revelatory segment after another, it explores what it was like for people of the day to be confronted with all that death in so short a span. Monday was the 150th anniversary of Antietam, still the bloodiest day of battle in American history. New research has found that the death toll in the war, long put at just over 618,000, was probably about 750,000.

"Transpose the percentage of dead that mid-19th-century America faced into our own time: Seven million dead, if we had the same percentage," says Drew Gilpin Faust, the president of Harvard, whose book "This Republic of Suffering: Death and the Civil War" is the basis for the program. "What would we as a nation today be like if we faced the loss of seven million individuals?"



The documentary "Death and the Civil War," written and directed by Ric Burns, includes photographs like this one of soldiers who died in battle. Library of Congress

Like the book, the program is divided into subsections — "Dying," "Burying," "Accounting" — that treat different aspects of wartime death, and each reveals a country that was completely unprepared for the losses the war brought. Most people, we're told, at first expected the conflict to be brief and to be a gentlemanly, low-casualty affair like some of the wars that had come before. No one understood what the combination of large armies and modern weaponry would do, or how bringing thousands of men together in camps would be an invitation to infectious diseases.

"The war has the misfortune of being fought at a time when military tactics, military strategy was a step behind technology," the historian J. David Hacker says, "and being fought about 10 years before we really had a proper understanding of what causes disease, how to prevent disease from breaking out and how to treat what diseases we have."

It is startling and painful to hear that the basic protocol we take for granted had not been imagined at the time, including the simple idea that the government should notify families when soldiers die. People back home would get the news by scanning newspaper listings of the dead, when they got the news at all. Today, when we're still trying to hunt down information on a relatively small number of soldiers missing in action in Vietnam, learning that tens of thousands of Civil War dead were never identified or accounted for is hard to process.

It becomes clear watching this program that the death toll must have thrown the country into collective shock. Mr. Burns traces the efforts of a few people to respond to the catastrophe by creating impromptu records of the dead or, on the battlefield, simply writing a note on behalf of a dying colleague to let family members know his fate. And the program continues into the postwar years, when people like Clara Barton made after-the-fact efforts to find remains and graves and rebury the dead closer to home or in newly created national cemeteries.

But "Death and the Civil War" isn't just a chronicle of how the nation eventually got its act together and learned the bookkeeping of mass-casualty warfare. It explores how the war's death toll helped define the government's side of the contract between state and populace: If we're going to ask you to die for your country, we have certain obligations to you and your survivors. And the program makes you appreciate the deep psychological transformation that all this must have brought about in the nation as a whole.

"When death is done in such a horrific way as in the Civil War, it shakes a culture at its sort of fundamental basis, and we have to create new ways to think about it," Thomas Lynch, the author and undertaker, says. "I think in many ways that the age of our disbelief began sometime around the Civil War."

American Experience

Death and the Civil War

On PBS stations on Tuesday night (check local listings).

Produced for PBS by WGBH Boston. Written and directed by Ric Burns; Mark Samels, executive producer; Li-Shin Yu, editor; Robin Espinola, Bonnie LaFave and Mr. Burns, producers; Oliver Platt, narrator; original concept developed by Paul Taylor; Buddy Squires, Stephen McCarthy and Allen Moore, cinematographers; music by Brian Keane.

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