

LOSERS ARE PIRATES

Edited by
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A Close Look at the PBS
Series "VIETNAM: A
TELEVISION HISTORY"



PREFACE TO THE REVISED EDITION

When Part 1 of *Vietnam: A Television History* aired on October 4, 1983, my initial reaction was simply shock. For nearly one hour that evening, my friends and I witnessed the first of a string of shows about the recent conflict in Southeast Asia produced supposedly as an "educational" series by Public Television. And yet the program contained enough misinformation to make us wonder what kind of education the viewers were supposed to be getting. Perhaps most unsettling was the experience of watching Communist Vietnamese leaders and cadres appearing on the screen along with propaganda movies being used as "historical data" without any question or debate as to their veracity. Meanwhile, countless non-Communist individuals who might have had a different view of the "Roots of War" were never heard from. It did not take us long, then, to conclude that the program was grievously biased.

In my outrage, I shot off a letter of protest to PBS and followed it up the next day with another letter after watching Part 2 of the series. This personal protest continued each week until the final episode as I attempted to point out to the producers some of the inadequacies of the series through details of each program. I was helped in this by my Vietnamese friends who were also disturbed by the series and supported my efforts to, in their words, "defend the honor of those who died for freedom."

As time went on, it became clear that many viewers were troubled by the series. These included Vietnam scholars, former American soldiers who had served in Vietnam, government officials, political commentators, and others. Scholars of the war have cited historical inaccuracies and omissions, biased presentations, and distorted interpretations that crop up throughout the production. The program seemed to be an irregular mixture of cliches and one-sided memories, causing consultant Douglas Pike to conclude: "Whatever this thing is, it is not history."

Vietnam veterans objected to the image they were given by a decidedly antiwar and anti-military production staff. One interviewee on the show, former prisoner of war Robinson Risner, complained that the producers had promised to let him preview his segment before the broadcast, but he never heard from them again. Looking at the way the series treats Risner, it is no wonder the producers suddenly disappeared.

Vietnamese refugees found fault with the series' content at numerous points. They felt their people were being presented in a distorted light--the South Vietnamese are shown as thieves and whores, their soldiers are described as "puppets" and mercenaries. The history of Vietnam certainly becomes skewed as Ho Chi Minh is elevated to universal heroism and the Communists monopolize all the virtue in the entire nation.

Persons who defend U.S. involvement in Vietnam get very little attention in the program, while critics are portrayed so generously that one can almost see haloes shimmering over their heads.

Some critics responded to the PBS series in articles and commentaries, not all of which are given as wide a circulation as the favorable reviews, if only because it is still fashionable to criticize, not clarify, the war. With friends' advice, I decided to go ahead and produce a book reviewing the series, presenting our ideas and relevant information that is either ignored or depreciated in the 13-hour documentary.

In the months following the first broadcast of the PBS film, I received a quite limited response to my protest from the series' producers. One PBS official in Washington, D.C., suggested that my opinions are too fixed. He chided me for using "loaded language" in my letters, such as the term "Communist" which I applied to certain characters in the war. This type of language, he wrote, has "perjorative implications" that did not promote rational understanding of the issues. From this person's comments, I gather that avowed Marxist-Leninist Ho Chi Minh, who taught his people that Stalin was a hero for all humankind, should be referred to as simply a "guy" or an "individual" without any further elaboration. Readers who are uncomfortable with my loaded language should feel free to substitute for "Communist" any word they please.

Peter McGhee, the Program Manager for National Productions at WGBH in Boston, answered my letters with confessed reluctance and echoed the sentiments of his colleague noted above. He did promise to give my report of the series "the same careful consideration and expert review" used in making the documentary. Mr.

McGhee and his producers have been sent copies of my book and have yet to respond, even to acknowledge receipt of the material. Needless to say, WGBH has declined to answer any of the many arguments against the series included in this book.

Lawrence Grossman, former president of PBS and now the head of NBC, did acknowledge receiving my book, but promised he would not read it for a very long time, when he should have the "leisure" to do so. In any case, he feels that James Banerian has some "strong opinions" about the war, whereas he, Stanley Karnow, and Richard Ellison are as innocent as babes. So much for objective reasoning.

In the meantime, Reed Irvine and his organization, Accuracy In Media—a self-styled "watchdog" of the media—received a small grant from the series' biggest sponsor, the National Endowment for the Humanities, to produce a brief "rebuttal" to the 13-hour documentary. A number of articles criticizing the series have been written by scholars, commentators, veterans and other observers, dampening the image of "universal acclaim" touted by the people at PBS.

Forced to respond to their critics, WGBH has resorted to evasive tactics aimed at protecting the program's image without actually justifying what the program says. These maneuvers include making repeated statements regarding the show's self-proclaimed greatness, sending "thank you" notes to people who never supported their production, and explaining all objections to the film as being nothing more than the emotional outbursts of a few disgruntled expatriot Vietnamese.

As the reader will see, there is much more to the criticism than what the producers would have us believe. This book hopes to present some of the discontent expressed by persons who watched the film with a knowledgeable eye and did not like what they saw. Some of the series' consultants have spoken in support of my effort. One of them, Nguyen Ngoc Huy, a political scientist and negotiator for South Vietnam at the Paris Peace Talks, is currently engaged in translating *Losers Are Pirates* into Vietnamese and French for the edification of a larger audience.

All this is meant to suggest that there is good reason for criticizing the PBS *Television History*. Yet, in the final analysis, the

readers must decide if the information being presented here is honest and worthwhile to their view of the war. I hope that in these pages I have contributed something positive to the study of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos through the unfortunate medium of a critical review of a major history lesson.

— James Banerian
January 1985

INTRODUCTION: REVIEWING THE WAR IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

1975 was a fateful year for the countries of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. On April 17th, the Communist Khmer Rouge took control of Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia as the Republican Government finally collapsed after years of fighting. Two weeks later, on April 30, the Saigon government of South Vietnam formally surrendered to the Communist forces led by Hanoi and a second country had fallen. In December of the same year, a new government was formed in Laos which gave power to the Communist Pathet Lao.

Many observers around the world viewed with relief the apparent end to the fighting in Southeast Asia. The war had lasted decades; countless lives had been lost, and the countries formerly of French Indochina suffered greatly in their introduction to the modern world. The political conflict and the military actions taken in Southeast Asia had troubled the minds and hearts of people all over the world. It seemed the time had come for peace and rebuilding.

But the killing and suffering did not stop. Millions of Cambodians were executed, tortured or starved to death by the Khmer Rouge in four years of savage "revolution". The Hmong tribespeople of Laos have become victims of an extermination campaign directed by the Vietnamese Communists utilizing chemical warfare and military attacks. Some tens of thousands of Lao have been arrested and sent to "seminar" camps where many are starved, tortured and mistreated. Vietnamese soldiers, government officials, artists, clergy and others have been confined in concentration camps scattered across Vietnam. Thousands more have been forced to live on farm labor camps and plantations in unproductive areas of their country. Hanoi has contracted with the Soviet Union to deliver laborers to Siberia to work on the Soviet oil pipeline in repayment of the war

debt. The people and cultures of Cambodia and Laos are being gradually eliminated by means of a "Vietnamization" campaign involving the military occupation of the two countries, the forced migration of Lao and Cambodians from the cities which are then occupied by Vietnamese, forced intermarriage with Vietnamese, obligatory education in the Vietnamese language, the renaming of streets, villages and, in time, entire provinces with Vietnamese titles . . . All three countries have been thrown into extreme poverty and oppression. Meanwhile, the fighting and subversive activities of the Vietnamese Communists have extended into Thailand.

Hordes of Southeast Asians have fled their homes as refugees since 1975. The most famous of these are the Vietnamese "boat-people", whose risky flight across the sea was given little attention by the news media until 1979 when Malaysia threatened to drive any more refugees out to sea unless the world did something about the growing number coming to her shores. The International Red Cross estimates that 300,000 boatpeople have perished on the sea, victims of rough waters, lack of provisions and attacks by pirates. Land refugees from Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam face security patrols of Vietnamese Communist and their allies, as well as bands of robbers in the unguarded areas along the Thai borders. Stories of rape, murder, robbery, detainment and torture are common among all refugee groups. And, too, life in the refugee camps offers more problems: inadequate housing, improper sanitation, food shortages, ill treatment by camp workers and guards, and the despair of never knowing when one might be accepted for settlement in another country . . . Instead of things getting better for the Southeast Asians, they are getting worse.

Here in America the war has not ended either. The dilemmas, the questions, and the uncertainty remain in the minds of those who cared about our country's involvement in that difficult war. We are concerned about the nation's strength and honor, its position in the world and directions for the future. We are troubled by our government's decisions and our military's actions and their implications in our lives now. Our anger and frustration have been bottled up inside us for nine years, ever since our historic defeat in Vietnam. We still have not learned how to deal with this reality and place it in perspective.

This is certainly true for the Vietnam veterans. For the young men and women who served during the war, the experience was perhaps the most profound one of their lives, and at the same time the one most difficult to face. Many had felt they were not receiving the support of the folks back home; when they returned to the States, they were often met with coldness or hostility. A decade or more later, they are still left with questions about themselves and the society they live in.

The war has left a bad taste in the mouths of many Americans. Few people are interested in talking about it. One can almost visualize a cloud of perplexity and shame hanging over people's heads when the subject comes up. A sinister image has been laid on us, an image of horrible mistakes, of senseless destruction, of blood on our hands. Yet, at the same time, there is a recognition of the Communist heritage in Indochina and a suggestion that claims of America's supposedly reprehensible behavior in that "immoral war" do not make sense in the context of Communist brutality. There are doubts – and perhaps, as well, the desire to finally know what really happened.

So at some time or other America must look back at the war in Southeast Asia and across the waters of the Pacific to see what is happening now in order to learn, to understand and to find some personal answers. The situation in Southeast Asia is not, and has never been, a simple matter. Southeast Asia cannot be looked at with old, fixed attitudes and idle speculation about what might have been. Instead, it must be approached with an open mind, with no intellectual restraints, otherwise it will never make sense and we will never overcome our confusion and guilt. The war and its legacy must be looked at boldly and with a critical eye neglecting no facet of its complicated form. No shallow or superficial review will satisfy our deep-seated hunger to know the truth and regain our self-esteem.

Interest in the war was beginning to reawaken in late October 1982 when a week-long series ran on a Los Angeles television station. The series was called *Vietnam: The Ten Thousand Day War* (sic) and aired two hours each night. The program was characterized by its uninhibited use of Communist propaganda film footage; dull, repetitive and uninspired production; and a rather amateurish

analysis of its subject. Vietnamese residents of Southern California protested the series to the station, all to no avail as it was shown for a second time in mid-1983.

The PBS series, *Vietnam: A Television History*, was greeted with greater expectations. Beginning in October 1983, the program was to run for thirteen parts until the end of the year. It was to cover the so-called "American war" in Southeast Asia from its roots to its "legacy". The reputation of PBS and the fact that it is a national educational network had a lot to do with viewer expectations. Viewers anticipate more objectivity from public television than from a private television corporation and greater sensitivity to differing opinions. Furthermore, the PBS series was presented as an educational documentary, with instructional guides, audio materials and production manuals accompanying the films. The producers boasted a staff of over 50 researchers as well as materials from archival films, 300 personal interviews, and television news stories from U.S. and foreign networks. With several years of production and a multi-million dollar budget, the producers apparently felt quite confident that they were offering a significant contribution to the history of

the war.

Early press reviews of the series reflected some of this confidence. One example is the article by Fox Butterfield written for the *New York Times*. Butterfield called the program "a meticulously researched and carefully balanced... documentary that may broaden many Americans' understanding of Vietnam, if not change their opinions about the war...", adding that the series "has something to offend, and please, both hawks and doves". Similar comments were made by other reviewers and the program's alleged objectivity and balance were often noted, along with commendations for the producers who brought to the air a number of rare and curious historical documents.

Later reviews were more critical. In January, 1984, an *Accuracy In Media* (AIM) report panned the series as "The Flawed History of Vietnam". Editor Reed Irvine disputed the program's claim to balance, declaring that "the balance all too often seemed to come out balanced on the left". The AIM report focused on a few specific points, such as the series' contention that Ho Chi Minh was primarily a nationalist, the role of the American media in bringing about the fall of Ngo Dinh Diem, the incompetence of reporting during the Tet Offensive, and the series' failure to put the war into post-war perspective. Irvine was especially critical of the use of public funds in sponsoring the program.

Based on the reviews seen by this writer, approval for the series seems to come from two groups: those who opposed America's involvement in the war and others who have limited background in the history of Southeast Asia and the war. Persons in the first group find that the series confirms many of their perceptions and prejudices, thereby justifying their past anti-war attitude. If they have any complaint, it is that the series does not criticize the U.S. harshly enough. Persons in the latter group are simply not in a position to judge the overall balance and accuracy of the program. They are satisfied, since the series reflects what they learned largely through the media – a matter of the blind leading the blind.

On the other hand, the program is criticized by Vietnam scholars, government officials, military officers, Vietnam veterans, and Vietnamese refugees, who consider it a biased and inaccurate representation of the war. According to these critics, the series does not

contain a balance of opinions on some essential topics nor does it necessarily give a true or complete picture of the war and what was actually happening on the field. One common complaint of refugees is the way the program uses propaganda information from Communist sources which is often inaccurate and always biased. Throughout the program Communist officials, soldiers and political cadres are interviewed without an opportunity being given to non-Communist sources to provide a balance. Serious gaps and omissions in information are noted throughout the series by Americans and Southeast Asians who were themselves personally involved in the matters being described. And, too, the overall presentation of the series gives the strong impression of a biased and non-objective attitude on the part of the producers which, these critics fear, will lead to harmful conclusions on the part of the American viewers.

More than a few Vietnamese critics of the PBS presentation have suggested the producers were politically motivated in making the series. They have theorized the producers are trying to influence public opinion in order to see that diplomatic relations are established between the U.S. and the Communist Vietnamese government and that war reparations be made to the Hanoi regime to compensate for all the damage done to the country by the U.S. during the war. Or, they say, the producers hope to convince the American public that the U.S. should not intervene in conflicts in the Middle East or Latin America in order to avoid a "second Vietnam". Some Vietnamese have even accused the series of - deliberate or not - aiding the KGB in a campaign of misinformation aimed at influencing the course of U.S. foreign policy. In any event, the series has angered and upset a lot of people and it would seem that this is not without good cause.

Before we begin looking at the series in detail, it may be helpful to the reader if we point out exactly what this book is not intended to be and what its intended purpose is.

First of all, the book is *not* intended to give a comprehensive history of Vietnam or the war in Southeast Asia over the past 50 years. Our resources are limited; we do not have a multimillion-dollar budget to work with nor the time in which to respond adequately with such a massive task. We don't pretend to tell everything.

We do not defend the U.S. policy in all its shapes and forms as it coursed through the war for over thirty years. We do not deny that mistakes were made by the American government in its understanding and handling of the war. In many cases, contributors to this book have been among the first to criticize specific actions of the American government or individuals connected with it.

We do not deny that American military actions caused extensive damage to parts of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos or that wartime violence sometimes resulted in tragic incidents or atrocities.

It is not our intention to defend the South Vietnamese government in all its actions or individuals within the government for personal actions they might have committed while they were in power. Every government in the world has its problems and South Vietnam, too, had its share. These must be looked at in context.

We do not deny that the *Television History* contains some truth in parts of its presentation. We are not interested in quibbling over details or nitpicking in order to sound off our complaints. It is only because we believe that there are major and serious errors in the program that we endeavor to bring our complaints to the public.

This critique does have a number of substantive and positive aims. These are:

- to provide some major points of argument with the producers

- of the series regarding information and opinions expressed during the course of the thirteen parts;
- to indicate places where we feel information has been misrepresented or omitted, thus giving the viewers an inaccurate picture of the war from its roots to its legacies;
 - to provide a context for certain parts of the war's history which we feel are superficially treated by the producers;
 - to dispute the opinion that the program is objective and balanced;
 - to dispute the opinion that the program is adequately researched and accurate;
 - to express our views of one aspect of the war which is not dealt with in the series, namely: the role of the U.S. news media in affecting understanding of the war;
 - to better inform the producers and the sponsors of the series, as well as educators and the general public, of the realities of the war in Southeast Asia as we see them.

A document as small as this book cannot pretend to be conclusive. Nonetheless, it can provide a viewpoint different from that given by the series and a forum for those who, for one reason or another, were not permitted to speak on the television series.

We have a very special concern regarding this television series. Even before it was shown in the United States, the program was broadcast in Europe and other parts of the world. Marketing of the films, videotapes and accompanying materials had already begun. The series is intended to be used as educational material for adult-level classes with an instructor's guide, viewers' guide, and other accessories. Our concern is that this program is being used as a historical document despite its serious flaws and inaccuracies. Some Vietnamese have lamented that in a few years the program may be shown to their children in schools, giving the children a poor impression of their parents' role in the war and their reasons for being in the United States. These refugees are afraid that in the future there will be no one to dispute the information presented in the series, that its influence will extend beyond 1983, when it was first shown, and continue to trouble them in the future. We feel this concern is valid and so make public our complaint about the series and the intentions of the producers.

We, the editor and sponsors of this book, will readily admit to our own personal bias. We share the pain and anguish of those who suffer under Communism, a system which promotes the destruction of cultures and societies with a policy that expresses disregard for human rights. While millions of people live under conditions of brutal oppression, facing imprisonment, torture, exile, or other forms of abuse by Communist governments, and while citizens of Communist countries are denied the essential freedoms that are the right of all human beings, we cannot sit still, though we should enjoy the freedom they long for. Stanley Karnow and Richard Ellison may consider the Communist Vietnamese to be heroes. We do not. No doubt this attitude will be reflected in the following pages.

Now, let us look at *Vietnam: A Television History*.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Recounting history is not an easy task. If that history revolves around a war, the job is no simpler. The many events, issues and characters involved in a war are complex and often controversial. Rarely can one map out a clear transition from one point to another. Essential background information may be lacking or clouded by secrecy or the absence of crucial records. Argument and debate may cause one issue to be interpreted in several different ways. In the end, the historian is left to his or her own sense of rational judgment while sifting through data about the past to form impressions and make interpretations.

Retelling the modern history of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos is a challenge to historians, even those who have observed the region for years or decades. An enormous amount of information has been written, filmed or taped concerning the Southeast Asian conflict, making it by far the most recorded episode in the history of humankind. However, this huge store of information may be more of a detriment to understanding the war than an aid, unless it is used with a critical eye and a fair knowledge of the fundamental issues. Careless use of such resource material can result (and already has resulted) in misinterpretation and misunderstanding of the war. Research and study are further hampered by the current nature of the two wars, which have generated strong emotions that influence viewpoints and inhibit fair judgment. The historian must take pains to avoid the traps laid by personal biases and presumptions. Caution and prudence must precede any investigation and dominate the historian's final presentation.

Despite the difficulties, one might yet hope to see a documentary or historical account of the Indochina Wars that presents the people and the issues of the wars in a fair and balanced manner. By "fair and balanced" we mean that all responsible viewpoints would be reviewed with an attitude of respectful consideration and objectivity by persons more interested in offering the facts than in proving

theories. Put another way, one might hope to find a history that does not tell its audience what to think but, instead, provides the substance for intelligent reflection so that individuals may form their own opinions and draw their own conclusions. Post-war histories, while not without their disadvantages, do have the added benefit of hindsight, which, when properly applied, can enable us to see the events and outcome of the war in a clearer perspective. "Lessons" from a war may not emerge until the dust has settled, or at least until such time as we can stand back and re-examine the events without feeling the burden of immediate involvement.

It is unfortunate – if not tragic – that the PBS series *Vietnam: A Television History* neither meets the basic goals of fairness and balance nor takes advantage of post-war realities to help enlighten its audience. Like the television camera which gives the series its visual cues, the *Television History* looks at the war with a very narrow focus, pointing at specific targets while avoiding the immense environment that surrounds them. In this way, the broad perspective is missed and what the viewer sees is not necessarily a faithful reproduction of the way it was. In fact, the *Television History* strays so far off course that many Vietnamese refugees watching the program gave up in disgust after only two or three episodes.

In order to understand why the series failed so badly, it is necessary to look at the producers and examine their perspectives as they approached the history of the war.

The Beginning

According to Executive Producer Richard Ellison, the series was conceived by himself and journalist Stanley Karnow along with communications professor Lawrence Litchy. All three agreed that "the United States stood in need of a full-scale television history" covering Vietnamese culture and tradition, colonial domination and war and the period of U.S. involvement, "officially" known as the "Vietnam era". Station WGBH in Boston had just such a program in mind and the two teams "joined forces". But they needed money. (1)

One review of the series describes the process that developed: "The orientation of the original production team (actually three teams, one American, one British and one French) was decidedly

left-leaning and it seemed certain that the product was doomed to be nothing more than an unabashed ideological statement on the war." However, this approach did not attract sponsors, so "the script was revised and made less doctrinaire. The fear of total dishonesty held by many – 'made in Hanoi' as one early critic predicted – was not realized." The producers "labored mightily" to allow objective journalism (albeit "American-style") to prevail and "in doing so have trampled on both the sacred cows of the left and the shibboleths of the far right". (2)

If objectivity was not the original intent of the series, did the program truly convert to honesty in the end? This writer feels that it did not and that, aside from scattered token references to "opposing views", there is a basic message that comes out of the series. That is what this book is about.

Chief Correspondent

The principal researcher for the so-called "Vietnam Project" is Stanley Karnow, referred to as its "Chief Correspondent". Karnow's credentials as a journalist are often cited as evidence of his qualifications for the task. He served as a correspondent for *Time* and *Life* in Paris and Southeast Asia, and later for the *Saturday Evening Post*, the *Washington Post*, and NBC news. He was associate editor for the liberal *New Republic* and contributed to a number of publications, including the *New York Times Magazine* and the *Atlantic*. Among Karnow's book credits are an account of the Chinese Cultural Revolution entitled *Mao and China: From Revolution to Revolution* and the *Southeast Asia* volume for the *Time/Life* series. His new work is the "companion book" for the television series called *Vietnam: A History*, subtitled *The First Complete Account of Vietnam at War* (1983, Viking Press).

A Harvard graduate, Karnow also studied political science in Paris, an experience which he believes gives him a unique advantage in reviewing American foreign policy. In essence, Karnow feels his perspective is more detached and impersonal than that of other observers and his knowledge of the French language has enabled him to get closer to the Vietnamese Communist leaders, some of whom received their education at French schools. (3)

Karnow has been described as a "dove" on Vietnam and criticized

for writing for the leftist *National Guardian* in his early years as a journalist. (4) But these points are not as important as the fact that Karnow is neither a historian nor a qualified researcher, as his *History* clearly shows. He has tried to create a popular account of the war while at the same time providing enough information to make the reading educational, so much as Karnow would like to educate. For style he relies on his journalistic skills. The language is colorful, action shifts from scene to scene, mundane details are skimmed over or omitted, and analysis is light. The result is a mishmash of history (as journalists see history), generalization, hasty investigation, speculation, interpretation, observations borrowed from other sources (who are not given specific credit), personal narrative, anecdotes, and a profusion of quotable quotes (bandied about without reference to their original contexts). All this is done without footnotes, an apparent concession to the goal of avoiding too academic a style (however, making it difficult to cross-check his story).

In keeping with the tone set by the intimate designation "companion", the author feels free to interject the first person into his history whenever he sees fit. The reader learns, for instance, that Karnow first worked with photographer Larry Burrows for *Life* magazine in 1950. The reader may never have cared, but the reader was never asked. At the same time, we discover that Karnow's landlord in France in the 1950s was "the son of a prominent socialist of the 1920s and great-grandson of Karl Marx", a fact which might reveal something about the Chief Correspondent's political influences at the time.

Karnow is not shy to publicize his personal opinions in his "historical" account. In an objective history, frank statements of personal notion are annoying and an imposition on the reader who wishes to make up his or her own mind on some particular issue. Like Karnow, the reader may not be particularly fond of Richard Nixon; but what does the author hope to prove by referring to something he calls "pugnacious paranoia" on the part of the former president (p. 609) or by saying that "... determined to demonstrate his power, (Nixon) plunged into a crazy sequence of events in Cambodia"? (p. 603) Karnow, who has never held responsibility for public office and whose major decisions in life include choosing

which color socks to put on each morning, is hardly in a position to speak so brazenly of a U.S. president, especially when his own insight is so often shallow and unconvincing. Yet this he does with the assistance of public funds and in the name of "education."

Another example of the way Karnow's commentary may interfere with the reader's assessment of an issue can be found in his description of South Vietnam's strategic hamlet program. The author informs us that Ngo Dinh Nhu was an "unleavened intellectual", the Saigon regime's earlier agrovillage program was a "scheme" and a "botch", and the strategic hamlets failed so miserably that peasants actually "rallied" to the Viet Cong. (pp. 255-7) The real questions about the program (what were its goals, how was it carried out, what problems did it encounter, and so on) are lost in these and other negative judgments made by the author. The reader must go elsewhere for objective information.

The *History* also suffers whenever Karnow indulges in fanciful romanticism. This he does often, especially when talking about the Communists, whose "nationalist zeal" makes his head spin. One can almost see the stars in his eyes as he recounts the travels of Nguyen Ai Quoc (Ho Chi Minh), shares a tear with Pham Van Dong, or follows Col. Bui Tin on the perilous journey to the South through the "web of trails" in Laos and Cambodia. The fact that as associate editor of the Communist army newspaper Bui Tin is an experienced propagandist and story-teller is lost on the Chief Correspondent as he brings his book to a close in classic style: After decades of war, South Vietnam finally rests in the hands of the Communists. Col. Bui Tin of the victorious army reassures all "patriots" that they have nothing to fear; this should be a time of joy for all! Thirty years in the Viet Minh and North Vietnamese Army, a veteran of Dien Bien Phu, a trooper of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and now surviving a tank skirmish on a Saigon bridge, the colonel strolls into the park behind the presidential palace, stretches out on the grass and gazes up at the sky, "exalted!" (pp. 669-70)

One can only read this and shudder - has history come to this?

Karnow compares the effort involved in writing his book to "an elephant getting pregnant. It takes a long time before you're ready to give birth." (5) Apparently it was a troubled birth, since one can find in the book some awkward statements that are not given the

attention they deserve. For example, in recounting the disorder in Vietnam during the 1930s, the author writes: "In Ho's native Nghe An province, they even set up a 'soviet.'" (p. 124) According to the text, "they" refers to "hungry peasants", although it should be the Communist revolutionaries. Karnow does not mention the Communists until *after* this remark, and then never connects them to the soviets in Nghe An and Ha Tinh provinces, thereby giving the impression that illiterate starving peasants spontaneously engineered uprisings with Communist intent. The reader may conclude that this was a careless error on the author's part, but that is not certain, given Karnow's inability to distinguish between a poor farmer and a trained revolutionary. The error further serves to reinforce Karnow's theory that Vietnam was ripe for an "agrarian revolution" that had deep historical roots among the ordinary peasants. As well, the author fails to note that the soviets were a disaster and that as a result the Communists were nearly crushed by the French.

If Karnow's *History* is notable for what it says, it is also revealing for what it does not say. Although the author pursued interviews with top Communist officials, he shows surprisingly little interest in the atrocities they directed. One of many examples is the Land Reform Program in North Vietnam in the 1950s. This program – which witnessed the deaths of perhaps a hundred thousand Vietnamese from execution, torture, imprisonment, exile and starvation, and turned many former supporters of the Viet Minh into enemies of the regime – is one of the most significant events in Vietnamese Communist history. Yet in Karnow's book, it occupies less than two pages from purpose to aftermath and is described in vague, general terms. (pp. 225-6) The only index reference to it is "Agricultural Reform Tribunals", which can only be found by extra effort. (Meanwhile, the index includes such staples of Vietnamese history as Joe Namath, Gregory Peck and Ulysses S. Grant.) The scanty account of the Land Reform is followed by ten pages of Ngo Dinh Diem's "cruelty" and failure to gather the support of the people. Karnow calls his history "the first complete account of Vietnam at War"; it would appear that some parts of history are not as complete as others.

Despite Karnow's obvious biases and opinions, the Chief Cor-

respondent has managed to convince some reviewers that he took on this task with an open and objective mind. He strives, for instance, to dispel any suggestion that he is out to whitewash the Communists by beginning his story at the end, with a description of post-war Vietnam, which he visited in 1981. All is not well in that sad country, moans Karnow in his chapter "The War Nobody Won". Poverty, hunger, corruption and repression rule the day! He talked with one woman, "a distinguished lady, formerly a dissident member of parliament" in South Vietnam who now regrets having opposed the Saigon regime because "with all its faults, it was preferable to Communism." (p. 36) Karnow distrusted her lament at first, but became convinced after meeting with people who had fought with the Viet Cong and now were dissatisfied with the Hanoi regime. It is a sign of Karnow's nearsightedness that he refused to believe what was patently clear and had been predicted for many years prior to the fall of Saigon: that Communism is a brutal system that would demoralize and oppress the people of the South just as it did the North. For his own reasons, the Chief Correspondent would not believe there were troubles in Vietnam until the Communists themselves told him so. Even then his eyes were not opened, since in the rest of his book Karnow persists in portraying the Communists as heroes of a bold "nationalist" struggle resisting the foreign interference of the United States. Did he justify this to his distinguished dissident lady friend? He does not say.

At the conclusion of his massive work, Karnow expresses his gratitude to all the people who helped him write his "first complete history of Vietnam." This incredible list includes everyone he talked to, from high officials in the U.S. government to Viet Cong terrorists, making no distinction whatsoever with regards to their individual or comparative integrity and honesty. The same man who thanks Tom Dooley and Henry Cabot Lodge also is grateful to Premier Pham Van Dong and NLF spokeswoman Nguyen Thi Dinh! The matter of which ones Karnow preferred talking to is another story.

Karnow's writing forms the textual basis for the *Television History*. However, each of the 13 parts was written and produced by others. Some critics of the series maintain that the book is stronger than the series in that it contains more detail. (6) Both productions share the same basic viewpoints and this writer is not

aware of any complaints from Karnow about the series, even when its "facts" do not match those recorded in his book.

Such is the written history of the "Vietnam war" of Stanley Karnow. Perhaps the saddest thing about this book is that it has enjoyed a place on the national best-seller list for months.

The Production

Executive Producer Richard Ellison is a freelance producer with experience in current affairs and popular science programs. He has worked for CBS, Time/Life Films, and served as director of current affairs programming for PBS for one year before becoming an independent agent.

A number of reviewers of the *Television History* have commended Ellison for trying to make the Vietnam series as balanced and objective as possible. Even Stephen Morris, who blasted the series in an article for the *Wall Street Journal*, credits Ellison with pursuing a "spirit of fair-mindedness." (7) Another writer describes the producer's attitude as a "painstaking search for balance." (8)

Remarks made by Ellison suggest broad-minded goals: "We will not find all the answers, but our goal will be reached if we can help viewers form the questions and invite them to draw their own conclusions." (9) "We tried hard not to load it in any particular direction. In all faith, we tried to do a responsible job that will enlighten, not obfuscate." (10)

All this sounds nice, but it does not obscure the fact that Ellison and his crew entered upon their project armed with a number of doubtful assumptions about the war and how it should be presented.

One misguided assumption is the idea that balance and honesty could be assured by calling on consultants from every corner of the intellectual globe. The series approached, so we are told, "more than sixty eminent scholars" in different fields. The series' *Guide* names 55 "consultants", not all of whom are either eminent or scholars.

To be sure, there are some responsible individuals among those listed, including: Guenter Lewy, who hoped his book *America in Vietnam* would dispel some of the myths about the war; Douglas Pike, Director of the Indochina Studies Project at UC-Berkeley and

authority on the Viet Cong; Gerald Hickey, anthropologist, author of *Village in Vietnam* and two volumes on the highland people of Vietnam; and Peter Braestrup, whose important study of media distortion of the Tet Offensive is not mentioned in the series' credits.

Producer Ellison talks about the importance of "teamwork" in his production and mentions that some "intense" seminars were held to develop the series. But Coach Ellison must have forgotten to tell his whole "team" about his gameplan. Guenter Lewy called the consultant list a "sham" and said he had seldom been consulted by the producers. Stephen Young, Dean of the Hamline School of Law and another "consultant", said he was interviewed for a day and a half in 1978 and his advice was ignored. (11) Douglas Pike participated in a two-day conference criticizing the series conducted by Accuracy in Media. Other consultants have noted inaccuracies and omissions in the program. The reader may well wonder what happened in Ellison's seminars.

There are other, more controversial members of the consultant team. Tran Van Dinh, for example, a former supporter of Ngo Dinh Diem, later turned apologist for the Communists. Frances Fitzgerald, whose limited knowledge of Vietnamese culture and history was sufficient to condemn South Vietnam and America's place in the war. George Kahin, who asserted that the formation of the National Liberation Front was the result of spontaneous insurrection in South Vietnam without any connection to Hanoi; his theory has been disproven time and again by various observers (including Stanley Karnow), yet it still managed to sway the producers of the PBS series. And Gareth Porter, shameless supporter of the Communist revolutions in Southeast Asia who in 1976 declared that Cambodia was turning toward prosperity under the Khmer Rouge.

Another consultant for the series was Wilfred Burchett. Like jolly Saint Nick, Burchett traveled far and wide spreading good cheer (in his case it was the cheer of Communism) until he passed away in 1983. Observers generously described him as "pro-Communist" and he was exiled from his home continent of Australia. Burchett was involved in anti-American propaganda during the Korean war and he returned to harass the U.S. again during the

"Vietnam era." Some American POWs met him when he came to interview them for his television show; to the POWs, Wilfred Burchett was known as "Well-fed Bullshit." Burchett's name does not appear on the credits for the PBS series, perhaps because he was eventually identified as a paid stooge for the KGB. (12)

For this important project, Producer Ellison needed a skilled translator, someone both competent as a linguist and sensitive to the Vietnamese, to act as a contact and communications link (actually, he probably needed two or three for the job). He had many people to choose from. There are several hundred thousand Vietnamese living in the United States, some of them professors, teachers, former government officials, information specialists, professional linguists and other qualified persons who might be counted on to provide reliable translation. But nearly all of these were disregarded because they are refugees, and therefore suspected of bias against the Communists, whom the series needed to cooperate with. And so, for this grand production, the producers turned to Stanley Karnow's alma mater and selected Ngo Vinh Long.

Professor Long is not a refugee (some refugees would add cynically that he is not Vietnamese), but came to this country in 1964 as a student. He graduated from Harvard and became involved in Southeast Asian studies in the 1960s. Long participated in the antiwar movement and currently supports the Hanoi regime. Many refugees regard him as a Communist. The very mention of his name sets tempers flaring and once an irate refugee threw a Molotov cocktail at him. When Long and Don Luce (another notorious spokesperson for Hanoi) appeared at the USC "Vietnam" conference in 1983, security was tightened to avoid any untoward incidents. One newspaper asked Richard Ellison about the choice of Ngo Vinh Long as translator and the producer replied, "We were not aware of his reputation in the refugee community." (13) Indeed.

Harvard University seems to have generated a considerable degree of the inspiration for this project. The reader should be aware that the head of that university's history department, John Womack, has publicly admitted that he is a Communist, and he is proud of this fact. (14) It was also a Harvard biochemist named

Mathew Meselson who announced that the controversial "yellow rain" that has killed tens of thousands of people in Indochina and Afghanistan is nothing other than natural fungus residue in bee droppings! Interesting things are certainly being taught behind those ivy-covered walls.

The American television station behind the PBS series is WGBH of Boston. The AIM report on the series notes that WGBH "has produced such gems as the 'World' series which included programs that cast communist North Korea in a favorable light and examined race problems in Great Britain through Marxist eyes." (15) *Human Events* was concerned that the station "has developed what it calls 'close working relations' with the National Council of Churches in an effort to distribute 'instructional materials' on the series." Says the reviewer, "The NCC provided nearly a half million dollars to the communist Vietnamese regime, some of which has been given for concentration camps in 'new economic zones.'" In 1977, NCC president James Armstrong signed a statement declaring that Hanoi "should be hailed for its moderation and for its extraordinary efforts to achieve reconciliation among all its people." (16)

In case there is any doubt which personalities the producers wish to be identified with, one need only look at their publicity photographs. In the series *Guide* Stanley Karnow is pictured standing with Communist Premier Pham Van Dong. In Fox Butterfield's favorable *New York Times* review, there is a shot of Producer Ellison smiling behind Premier Pham Van Dong. Not an American veteran. Not Henry Kissinger or Dean Rusk. Not General Westmoreland or William Colby. Not Nguyen Cao Ky or a refugee. Not even Clark Clifford or Daniel Ellsberg. They will only be seen with Ho Chi Minh's old comrade, a symbol (in their eyes) of the resistance and strength of the Vietnamese people.

This is not to suggest that Karnow and Ellison are Communist agitators, deliberately intent on subverting the nation through their TV series. But their effort to associate themselves with Communist leaders in Vietnam is undeniable. It comes about for two reasons. First, the producers wish to associate themselves with "winners", not "losers", and America and South Vietnam are clearly losers as far as they are concerned.

But the second reason is more important. The producers do not

view themselves merely as journalists developing a documentary about a war. They also seek to be ambassadors of peace and reconciliation, reaching out to the Vietnamese whom they see as victims of America's mistakes. Their *Television History* is not simply an educational tool for understanding the war, but part of a sacred mission to act as a bridge between the allegedly sensitive and sympathetic elements of the United States and the "innocent victims" of brutal American foreign policy. More than just report history, the producers seek to mediate it and bring about a new era of friendship and cooperation between Americans and Vietnamese. These lofty goals are evident throughout their production as well as through efforts to promote the series by the American Friends Committee, a pro-Hanoi Quaker organization.

So narrow is their vision, however, that the producers cannot distinguish between the common people of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, who suffered in the war and the brutal Communist leaders who still repress and terrorize those poor people.

Lawrence Litchy, the program's Director of Media Research, is a communications professor for the University of Maryland. Litchy has studied how U.S. TV networks have broadcast the war and "screened all of the major networks' news and documentary coverage of Vietnam from 1965 to 1975." (17) His research findings have been included in several publications and he contributed to Peter Braestrup's two-volume edition of *Big Story*.

Any serious effort to investigate media coverage of the war is commendable. However, the *Television History* is a different type of production and neither Litchy nor anyone else connected with the series has explained how brief clips of TV news films (already edited, spliced, rewoven, and otherwise processed for consumption on the evening news) can be used as primary source material (as happens in the series) along with films from a number of "archives" (including personal files, U.S. military libraries and Communist propaganda organizations), mixed with private interviews conducted many years later and tossed into one uneven jumble that can easily confuse the viewer, who may well wonder where each film came from and what its original form was. The producers apparently see no reason to qualify their production or caution the viewers; they are content to reassure the audience that what we are seeing is

exactly what the producers tell us it is. Unfortunately, the series does not always tell us what is being shown, or it tells only a part of the story and leaves the rest to our imagination.

Presumably because of funding problems, WGBH arranged with two foreign TV stations to produce several parts of the series. Central Independent Television of Britain produced four parts and Antenne-2 of France another two. In all, there are seven different producers for the 13 episodes, a fact which accounts for some of the unevenness of the series as a whole. (Some reviewers say that some parts of the series are better than others; the more pessimistic remark that others are worse than some.) WGBH and PBS have boasted of the "nearly universal acclaim" received by the series, which they feel confident is as balanced and objective as is humanly possible. It is therefore surprising to learn that the British and French stations have been permitted to produce their own versions of this series, so that there are at least three different *Television History*'s, each of which, we can rest assured, is as perfectly balanced and objective as the others!

Preconclusions

According to the series' *Guide*, the producers prepared a list of "key questions" to ask interviewees, questions designed to "illuminate" the events of the war. Some of the questions are striking, reflecting, as they do, the preconceived notions of the producers. Perhaps the most astonishing is the one that begins: "What enabled Communism to 'work' in Vietnam . . . ?"

The contention that Communism "worked" in Vietnam should come as a surprise to the hundreds of thousands of refugees who have fled that "success" over the years, not to mention the tragic souls wearing away in concentration camps, prisons, and other Communist institutions which are currently "working" quite well. Disregarding these realities, the producers insist that Communism attracted a "mass following" while other forms of "nationalism" or democracy did not. The "key question" does not allow for dissenting opinions.

This and several other conclusions reached by the producers are based on gross generalization, oversimplification and an unhealthy measure of misunderstanding about the war and the people of

Southeast Asia. A clear example of how poorly the producers express themselves can be seen in Stanley Karnow's summary conclusion about the Communist victory. Karnow writes: "The Vietnamese Communists struggled stubbornly for a generation, defeating France and later the United States, to unify Vietnam under their control. Their achievement, attained through immense human sacrifice, was a triumph of will over power. But the fruits of victory have been bitter." (18)

This statement is both simplistic and misleading. Among its inaccuracies are these: 1) It gives the Communists sole credit for defeating the French, overlooking the vast majority of the Vietnamese who supported the resistance yet were not Communists; the statement also ignores the crucial aid given the Viet Minh by China. 2) It pits the Communists against the Americans in the second war, implying that there was no South Vietnamese opposition to the Communist effort. 3) It gives complete credit for the 1975 victory to the Communists, again disregarding the many who supported the fight without being Communist, the thousands who lost their lives for reasons other than Marxism, and the countless who were betrayed by the Communists once the war was over. 4) The "immense human sacrifice" is more a reflection of the Communists' disregard for human life than evidence of some alleged fervor among the people. 5) By explaining the victory as that of "will over power", the author fails to grasp the numerous factors that entered into the Communist "triumph", including America's international and domestic political situation, considerable aid from China and the Soviet bloc, South Vietnam's defensive position, the confusion of the peasants, and so on. As for "will power", Karnow might have acknowledged that the Communists were willing to use terrorism, treachery, deceit, hatred and self-interest in order to pursue their goals; such enthusiasm is not necessarily laudible. 6) Finally, the "bitter fruits of victory", which include poverty, oppression and corruption, are largely due to inane socialist policies and not necessarily the war.

Through these statements as well as through their television series, the producers have made it clear that there are some matters which are axiomatic and cannot be debated. These include the following:

- The U.S. was mistaken for getting involved in Southeast Asia.
- The U.S. was mistaken in the way it handled the war.
- The U.S. was mistaken in getting out of the war, leaving behind the Saigon regime, which it created. (In short, the U.S. was damned if it got in, damned if it got out.)
- The Communists were nationalists with a justifiable cause.
- The Communist cause was apparent to the Vietnamese people and had strong popular support.
- Since the Communist cause was justified, the methods they used (terrorism, deception, manipulation, etc.) were justified.
- The South Vietnamese had no will to oppose Communism; their army did not want to fight for America's war; their government had no will to win.

To prove these and other ideas, the series employs shallow images, stereotypes, tokenism, clichés and narrow themes. Examples of these will be given in later chapters.

Exceptionalism vs. Communism

Central to the series' portrayal of the war and Stanley Karnow's *History* is the notion of America's "exceptionalism", which Karnow borrows from Prof. Daniel Bell, also of Harvard (one begins to wonder if there are no other institutions of higher learning in the world). The theory is summarized in Karnow's book in the chapter "The War Nobody Won", pp. 11-15. In brief, this idea contends that American involvement in Vietnam was rooted in this country's history and concept of America's uniqueness, or exceptionalism. America has been viewed as a land of opportunity, the hope of the future, and a model for the world. The American people were inspired by dreams of manifest destiny, "which signified belief in their obligation to export their benefits to less privileged civilizations abroad." Territorial expansion during the 19th century was coupled with idealistic yearnings to spread America's graces to the world. Later, although acquiring new territories, America did not seek to dominate them. And while some businesses did exploit the people of underdeveloped nations, the "more prevalent strain in America's expansionism was evangelical – as if the United States, fulfilling some sacred responsibility, had been singled out by the

divinity for the salvation of the planet." America promised the world democracy, liberty, justice, prosperity and peace. Some commentators urged America to take the lead in the 20th century, to accept America's "duty to preserve global order." This concept "acquired fresh urgency after World War II, as the specter of monolithic Communism haunted the United States." Presidents began speaking in "cosmic language" representing the U.S. as the world's hope. And playing that role, America became involved in Vietnam.

The theory of America's "exceptionalism" as expounded by Stanley Karnow has its weaknesses, not the least of which is its narrow focus. In suggesting that America's history is one steady stream facing outward with idealism and arrogance, this facile theory conveniently ignores contrary elements of America's history: notable waves of popular isolationism that strongly influenced foreign policy, historic American efforts such as Wilsonian diplomacy and the respect for the integrity of nations, the characteristic unpreparedness of America's military for the wars it has faced, and so on. In place of these facts, Karnow's readers are treated to passages from Walt Whitman and Henry Luce, who supposedly typify America's spirit over the two centuries.

What is true is that America is a major power in a world that has seen many serious conflicts with repercussions that extend far beyond the borders of individual countries. If Americans see their country as a symbol for ideals such as freedom and democracy, then they certainly are not alone. Millions of people around the world look to the U.S. for hope and guidance on behalf of those ideals — many of these hopeful admirers are citizens of countries ruled by Communist governments. Perhaps the image is not entirely arrogant bombast, as Karnow proposes.

Furthermore, the threat of Communist expansionism following World War II was not simply a shadowy "specter", but a frightful reality for many people. From the day Lenin and his Bolsheviks seized control of the Russian government, the Soviets have advocated, supported, and, whenever possible, directed "revolutionary" movements in other countries. Every leader after Lenin has reiterated the goals of world revolution, aiding and abetting its manifestations in "struggles" in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the

Americas. To scoff at this reality is to wear one's ignorance on one's sleeve.

And here is one of the most serious deficiencies of the PBS *Television History*: its failure to look at what Communism is and how it has grown over the years.

Russia, too, had its own brand of singularity, nurtured by the idealistic intellectualism of the 19th century. Ironically, this Russian self-image once revealed itself as an evangelical movement based on faith in the Russian Church. Some of Russia's great thinkers, including Tolstoi, believed in the superiority of Mother Church and were confident that she would be the salvation of the entire world. At the same time, the czarist government was engaged in actions aimed at expanding Russia's already massive borders. The Russian Communists inherited this zeal for growth and hoped to inject it into the Soviet citizens, replacing the religion of Russian Christianity with the pseudo-religion of Marxism.

The spread of Communism was facilitated by European colonialism, whose impressive force threatened peoples and cultures around the world. Colonialism brought education and opportunity to some, but it exploited many others and challenged the governments and societies of colonized countries. Western values offered new alternatives to those dissatisfied with the traditional systems, which had proven incapable of countering the West. In short, colonialism encouraged discontent and planted seeds of its own destruction.

Meanwhile, the Communists recognized this state of affairs and adjusted their methods to take advantage of it. Put another way, "Russian Communists did not create the 'revolutionary situation' in Asia and Africa", but they "were quick to exploit it and 'to push what was falling'." (19) By themselves, indigenous nationalist groups were weak and their prospects for victory uncertain. Lenin decided to seize the initiative and support the nationalists abroad, using their efforts to bring down the "Western empire." This strategy of subversion of the colonial world has been called "Lenin's greatest legacy to the Russian Communists." (20)

Bolshevik leaders met with Asian nationalists at Baku in 1920 and there resolved to back the colonial revolutions. Initially, the program emphasized ideology, but this tactic floundered on the realities of the time. The Communists changed course and promoted

the "nationalist" face of revolution.

After Stalin came to power, he concentrated his efforts on strengthening the home base of the revolution – Russia. Communists outside Russia received limited aid and often had to rely on their own devices in order to survive. Stalin did support the long-range goals of the revolution by training native cadres for more opportune times, but he would not risk losing his or Russia's power on their behalf.

After World War II, Stalin's mode was more sophisticated as he tried to protect Soviet strength in Eastern Europe. U.S. foreign policy was designed to contain what it saw as Soviet expansionism by bolstering Western Europe. By the 1950s, the U.S. had devised a new deterrent strategy that promised to meet with force any effort to alter the status quo. The Soviet Union responded by taking a different course for its "struggle." De-Stalinization included a broadening of the ideological base to attract more nationalist leaders in small countries, suggesting to the West that the creation of neutral Communist states might be an acceptable alternative. From this came the notion of "national communism", a concept which in fact contradicts the theory and goals of Communism. The Soviet Union was settling down to a prolonged conflict with the West.

Ho Chi Minh encountered Communism in the 1920s and liked what he found. Unlike conventional nationalist methods, the Communist system offered the organization, discipline, ideological base and material support needed to conduct a revolution. Just as importantly, Communist trainers accepted Ho, who had earlier rejected or been rejected by Vietnamese nationalists outside his country. Marxism offered a quasi-philosophy that suited Ho's shallow intellectual skills and Lenin's global doctrine provided a cause that satisfied Ho's bloated ego and desire for power. Ho Chi Minh envisioned himself as Marxism's apostle to Southeast Asia. He devoted himself to the world revolution until the day he died.

Characteristically, the *Television History* ignores most of the historical processes at work during this time and plays upon America's "exceptionalism." As far as the producers are concerned, the U.S., through its arrogant idealism, attempted to impose the democratic system on the Vietnamese, whom it wished to save from Communism, and that, they conclude, went against the wishes of the people.

From the Horse's Mouth

In his essay "Vietnam as Television History", Richard Ellison writes: "For our series to deal adequately with (the events of the war), it was in our view essential that Vietnamese viewpoints and experiences be included." Such Vietnamese views and experiences as are included in the series tend to come from the Communist side, although a handful of South Vietnamese are permitted to provide token responses to certain "key questions". Most of the "illuminating", it would seem, must come from the Communists.

By any standards, Communist Vietnam is a closed society. Visitors to the country are screened before being allowed to enter. Average citizens cannot talk freely with foreigners. People can be arrested for the things they say, not only in public, but in private, as well. Movement is restricted and fear of the security policy pervasive. Moreover, Communist leaders have a reputation for making false or self-serving statements to foreign journalists and for showing only those sights in Vietnam that have been properly arranged for the occasion.

The producers of the *Television History* seem to recognize this. Stanley Karnow remarks that talking to a person in Vietnam "is not like interviewing the man on the street in Oshkosh." (21) That's putting it mildly. Yet, during the series' 13 parts the viewer is never informed that the Communists demanded that interview questions be submitted to them beforehand for review. And the clipped film segments of those interviews give little indication of what Prod. Ellison admitted to one critic, that "many of their answers seemed virtually memorized." (22) Upon the producers' return from Vietnam, rather than complain about restrictions on free speech in that country, they actually complimented the Communists on their "candidness" and courage in agreeing to cooperate with foreign journalists.

The viewers may be rather confused by the fact that virtually all of these Communist officers and cadres are complete strangers to them. Who are Hoang Quoc Viet, Tran Duy Hung and Ton That Tung? What did they do during the war? The series does not say, beyond giving an obtuse rank or title. The viewers find themselves unable to identify these figures with any specific deed or policy

connected with the war. The interviewees become added parts of the amorphous entity known only as the "Vietnamese". Their credibility may be established by the program itself. Dr. Ton That Tung, for example, is fixed in our minds as a mild, sensitive physician who cares deeply about the suffering of his people. Why should the viewers doubt him when he declares that no one in the North ever complained during the war? It might make a difference if the series were to say that dear Dr. Tung has "treated" political dissidents in his office by administering lethal doses of "therapeutic" drugs. Complaints? No, his patients never complain.

This attitude toward the Communists reflects a basic trust in them as informants. As "nationalist heroes", the Communists are given respectability. Their just cause imbues them with honesty. And their suffering at the hands of the indiscriminately powerful Americans blesses them with sincerity. What would Prod. Ellison or Chief Correspondent Stanley Karnow say if they realized that the Communist Vietnamese are solid racists who consider white people inferior and American whites strong in technology but basically stupid?

Victims of the Communists are naturally disturbed by what they see in the program. To them, Communist officials are symbols of brutal oppression. As one former POW said, those men with epaulets on their arms are not boy scouts—they are the ones who did the torturing and killing. Refugees, too, are dismayed to see Northern officers and Viet Cong cadres boasting of the revolution's "achievements" without a word of criticism for the Hanoi regime. The very act of placing the Communists on American television is insulting to them.

The series proceeds to depict the Communists as fantasy figures—one American veteran aptly describes them as "Disneyland characters". Far from reflecting human feelings, the Communists in the series transcend earthly emotions, maintaining intact what a reviewer calls "the wartime legend of imperturbable Vietnamese heroism." (23) While American leaders stumble about in confusion and disarray and Saigon is replete with political chaos, the Communist leadership glides smoothly along its glorious course, borne on by the sanctity of its purpose. And as an American soldier "agonizes over killing an old woman", a Communist official

"proudly recites the martyrology of elderly fighters." (24)

Some refugees have complained that statements made by the Communists are inaccurately translated or modified in such a way as to favor the Communists. (25) One can find instances of this: A Viet Cong cadre complains of the "terrorism" of "America - Diem"; this comes out on the series as "Diem's repression". Mme. Nguyen Thi Dinh of the NLF relates how her brother was arrested by the French for putting up a flag with the hammer and sickle; the translation says he was only putting up "some red banners". Communist terminology is phased out of some quotations: "Comrade" Nguyen Ai Quoc becomes "Mr. Nguyen Ai Quoc"; "Chairman Ho Chi Minh" is said to be "President Ho Chi Minh" (suggesting that democratic rules placed him in power); and many derogatory references to Americans (such as "pirate") are dropped altogether. Sentences are paraphrased or summarized rather than literally translated. The smooth and simple translations that result stand in stark contrast to the statements of English-speakers, where every slip of the tongue, repeated word, twang and grunt is carefully recorded for posterity. How does one compare a scene of Pres. Kennedy stammering during a live press conference to staged films of Ho Chi Minh reading a speech to his compatriots? Or the slang of black Pvt. Jack Hill to the slick remarks of cadre Nguyen Bay in their contradictory testimony regarding an alleged massacre of civilians? The series dares make this comparison, apparently with a purpose.

A final word about Communist testimony: Over the years, the Vietnamese Communists have become experts in a tactic that might be called "atrocities diversion". By this strategy, the Communists emphasize some alleged atrocities committed by another party in order to divert attention away from their own brutal activities. In Hanoi, for instance, there is a war crimes museum created to "educate" visitors about the crimes committed by the "American imperialists" during the war. The museum includes photographs of napalm and fragmentation bomb victims, pieces of bombs and other macabre memorabilia aimed at proving the barbarity of the American war effort. Meanwhile the Communists say nothing of their own atrocities and visitors are too overcome with horror and shame to ask. Likewise in Cambodia, Vietnamese cadres guide visitors through museums depicting the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge; at

the same time, the Vietnamese continue to mistreat and kill Cambodians without making a public scene of it. The *Television History* has provided another forum. Communist leaders will talk about America's use of Agent Orange, for example, but neglect to explain their application of "yellow rain" on civilian areas of Laos. The producers shy away from pointing out hypocracies such as these, while they join in the chorus denouncing the U.S.

From the Other Side

Even as the Communists are taken without qualification as reliable witnesses to the war, certain other groups are not so easily accepted. For instance, Vietnamese refugees are afforded little opportunity to speak from their point of view, and when they are, it is in relation to "key" areas of concern: the "debacle" at Quang Tri in 1972 (not the heroism at An Loc), prostitution and black marketeering in South Vietnam (not the general way of life of the people), America's betrayal at the end of the war (not how Communism had terrorized and impoverished the North after 1954), and so on. Revealing an incredible lack of insight, the producers believed that the refugees would be convinced of the overall "balance" of the program if the boat people were given a few minutes to talk about concentration camps at the tail end of the series.

This attitude toward the refugees is not surprising. Firmly convinced that the war was solely "America's war", the producers wish to reassure themselves that the South Vietnamese were of little significance in and of themselves, other than being victims of rash U.S. policies. Furthermore, the image must be fixed that the South Vietnamese were losers with no will to win; consequently one sees them in that context at every possible turn in the series, although the refugees would dispute the image.

The belittling of refugee testimony is based on a traditional rule of research which says that people fleeing a country are biased against that country and so their views about it are naturally colored. Stanley Karnow put it in his own words in the introduction to his account of life in Communist China, *Bitter Seeds: A Farmer's Story of Revolution in China*, when he said: "... I was aware of a multitude of pitfalls involved in using refugee accounts. Many a refugee's story must be taken with a healthy measure of scepticism. People

naturally tend to embellish their narratives in order to enhance their own importance. Moreover, the person who may have risked his life to flee is not likely to be entirely objective about the country he has forsaken. Often, too, there is a desire to please the interviewer by telling him a 'good story'." (26)

This statement would be easier to swallow if similar considerations were declared regarding the value of testimony from the Communists these refugees were trying so hard to escape. In effect, it infers that people who flee brutality and oppression are more likely to lie than those who cause brutality and oppression. This same thinking is apparent in the *Television History*, which, as we will see, often accepts inaccurate or dubious information from Communist sources without confronting a refugee for a second opinion.

Furthermore, the above statement fails to acknowledge the substantial difference between bias and stupidity. People do not risk their lives for trivial reasons. The sheer numbers and mixed composition of the refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos should startle even the most stubborn observers. Does M. Karnow suggest that these many hundreds of thousands of people all have overly vivid imaginations and slipped through the jungles or over the waters simply so they could tell American journalists a "good story" and make themselves appear important? After working with refugees for several years, this writer feels confident in saying that as a whole, refugees are no more or less reliable than the average American, who has never fled an oppressive government. Refugees offer virtually the only source of intimate details concerning real life in Communist society and a variety of viewpoints which one could never find among official Communist informants. Their remarks about Communism, whether positive or negative, are certainly of greater value than those made by cadres given the official stamp of approval by the government and rehearsed prior to recitation before the cameras. And despite their alleged biases, refugees often prove to be quite sensitive and penetrating, especially as they recount their own personal experiences. Some individuals will exaggerate or prove untrustworthy at times. In this, refugees are no different from other people.

Despite complaints from some refugees during the airing of the

series, Richard Ellison maintained his confidence in the program. In a newspaper interview, he wondered aloud what the refugees would think of the series after watching all 13 parts. (27) The answer seems to be: they don't like it.

The American veterans are also poorly treated in the series. Like the Vietnamese, the veterans are subjected to stereotyped themes, the worst of which is the "war crimes" theme. Taking for granted that Americans committed war crimes, the producers sought, and of course found, atrocities of different kinds: shooting old women, burning huts, bombing civilian areas indiscriminately, and even an alleged "My Lai"-style massacre in 1967 (see Part 5). As if horrors have never before occurred in war, the *Television History* features these from one side, giving the impression that death and destruction are a part of America's heritage in Vietnam. The tragedy is enhanced by the apparently "senseless" nature of the conflict.

At the same time, the producers strive to express sympathy for the individual soldier. Although the Americans were killers, there were mitigating factors (heat and humidity, watching one's buddies die, putting up with the "cowardice" of the South Vietnamese soldiers, etc.). Television's two-dimensional nature gives these factors little substance and at times they are dispensed with altogether. The viewer is left with the feeling that America's war was dirty, while the Viet Cong fought "clean".

Besides being shown killing elderly women and burning huts, the American soldiers are depicted as stumblebums, foreign goons sweeping paths for mines while innocent villagers bicycle past. The image, too, is grossly stereotyped. This writer has met a number of veterans whose opinions about the war as a whole differ, but who affirm that as soldiers they acted professionally and did their jobs well. They object to the television image they have received and emphasize that what people see on television is not necessarily what the soldiers experienced.

The series' feeble attempt to express sympathy and honor to the veterans reveals the inability of the producers to come to grips with the contradictions in their work. As elements of the antiwar movement, they wish to show what they see as the ugliness of the way American soldiers acted during the war; at the same time, they try to absolve the soldiers of guilt. The result is a clumsy combin-

ation: with one hand the program pats the veterans sympathetically on the back, while with the other it thumbs its nose.

Finally, the series all but neglects the people of Laos and Cambodia who have suffered so much in the war. Only one hour is given to the two countries, and that hour is incomplete and stops abruptly without reminding the viewers that both those nations are currently being oppressed by the Vietnamese Communists. Their experience in the war and its "legacy" is just another shadow in the distance.

The American Ogre

Following the death of Stalin, the face of international Communism changed in several significant ways. New leaders arose in the Soviet Union and policies took on new directions. The bitter rivalry between Mao Zedong and his Russian comrades finally erupted into a so-called "split" in the Communist bloc. Both China and the Soviet Union faced serious economic problems. Revolts in Eastern Europe troubled the Soviet Union. China experienced a "cultural revolution." During the 1970s both powers sought accommodation with the U.S.

Despite their conflicts in some matters, Russia and China shared some goals in Southeast Asia. Neither really gave a damn about the fate of Vietnam itself, except as it suited their own needs. However, neither wanted to see the U.S. deeply committed in South Vietnam. Both were stunned by America's use of power and were forced to cooperate in order to combat it. Neither wanted Vietnam to fall under the influence of the other, and an uneasy joint venture developed to defend the North and carry on the war in the South (such cooperation among rivals is not unusual; politics engenders its own rationalism). And neither Russia nor China believed the war would last so long.

As the war dragged on, antiwar sentiment in the U.S. spread. Radicals became more vocal in their condemnation of American involvement in Vietnam and later they accused the U.S. of "expanding" the war into Cambodia and Laos.

In their eyes, America bore complete responsibility for the killing and destruction of the war while the Communists were often depicted as innocent victims of aggressive foreign policy. Charges of war crimes became popular, leading even moderates to question

America's conduct in the war. Arguments became more emotional and a shift in public opinion occurred. Whereas during the 1950s the popular ogre had been Communism, in the 1960s it became America.

After the war, when the extent of Communist repression in Southeast Asia became apparent and refugees continued to flee their homelands, critics of the war took different positions. Some changed their attitude and admitted they had been mistaken about the Communists. Others surrounded themselves in silence and declined to discuss the issue. Defenders of the myth of the American ogre either discounted reports of Communist cruelty as propaganda or declared that Communist repression was the result of U.S. intervention in the war. The idea that Communism is inherently brutal is not even considered.

In the PBS history of the war, viewers are presented with American policies, American weapons, and American destruction. The motives, policies, and conduct of the Communists are overlooked. A reviewer writes: "One predictable result of this imbalance is the suggestion that the U.S. bears the prime, if not sole, responsibility for the war's more horrifying tragedies." For example, the episode "Cambodia and Laos" shows American officials, bombing, covert activities and deception. Prosperous Cambodia falls into a nightmare. Meanwhile, "on the screen, no (Viet Cong) official debates the fine points of Cambodian neutrality. No Northern Politburo members reflect on the decision to arm Pol Pot. No insiders candidly recount Hanoi's intentions for postwar Indochina." And though the program gives us its version of the Nixon Doctrine, "what doctrine Le Duan and Le Duc Tho might have been following, one can only guess." (28)

The PBS series has been described as a "dual-vision history" and a "one-eyed account." Through its limited and deficient presentation, it joins those who brazenly denounce the American ogre, whose awful legacy remains in Southeast Asia. Stanley Karnow and Richard Ellison recognize the problems of Communism, but not where they come from. They will discuss Communist brutality and repression only after the cloud of America has been lifted from the scene. By then, the image has been sealed: America's war. America's mistake. America's responsibility.

That is the principal message of the *Television History*.

Anthology and Guide

The *Television History* is intended for use in college-level and adult education. Accompanying the series is an *Anthology and Guide*, edited by Steven Cohen. (1983, Alfred A. Knopf) As stated in the preface "How To Use This Guide", the series and *Anthology* are to help the student "to search for meanings in the experience and to participate in the struggle to arrive at conclusions." The book covers each of the 13 parts in the series with a brief "Historical Summary" to set the scene, followed by a "Chronology" timeline, "Points to Emphasize" in discussion, a "Glossary of Names and Terms" related to each segment, selected readings called "Documents", a series of questions under the title "Critical Issues for Discussion", and finally a list of "Suggestions for Further Reading".

Despite the book's organization and ambition, it fails to provide a comprehensive and objective background for learning about the war. In fact, it may confuse students further with its pronounced antiwar tendency and the editor's apparent lack of knowledge of the issues he wishes to elucidate.

The *Anthology and Guide* elaborates on many of the misconceptions of the television series, such as the alleged popularity of the National Liberation Front. As Stanley Karnow himself admits, the NLF was created and controlled by the Politburo in Hanoi and as such was not a spontaneous outgrowth of hostility to Ngo Dinh Diem in the South. Politically the Front was not popular and it consistently failed to attract non-Communist dissidents to its cause. Cohen's *Anthology*, however, claims that "much of the opposition to Diem crystalized" with the formation of the Front, which convinced Hanoi to "back" it. It further claims the NLF had "wide-ranging appeal" and was the strongest of Diem's opponents. (p. 58, *Anthology*) The Front's Chairman, Nguyen Huu Tho, is called a "moderate", then quoted using rather immoderate language against the U.S., which he described as "the extremely ferocious and dangerous ringleader of imperialism." (p. 185, *Anthology*) Throughout the book, the writers trample on historical facts and bask in erroneous generalizations while ignoring post-war perspective.

The "Documents" are a mixed bag. Besides their rather dubious selection, the readings suffer from a severe lack of historical and environmental context. For example, the *Anthology* reprints Anthony Lewis' denunciation of the 1972 December bombing of Hanoi, which he described as a terrorist action. (p. 331, *Anthology*) The book provides no follow-up to note that Lewis' portrayal of the bombing proved to be unsupportable and highly exaggerated (see Part 10). The result is that Nixon comes out looking like a murderous madman.

Like the series, the book's "Critical Issues for Discussion" expresses "key" ideas as defined by the editor's arbitrary whims. The questions asked are often written to guide discussion to preconceived conclusions (no "struggle" is required). The "Follow-up" to Part 6, for example, quotes Mao's "fish in water" analogy for guerilla fighters and the people, then asks: Did this apply to Vietnam? How did Diem try to stop it? And why did he fail? — Doesn't leave much room for discussion, does it?

According to Cohen in his "Acknowledgements", the reading suggestions after each segment "provide the only current, selective reading list on the history of Vietnam for a college-level audience." In fact, not only are the lists incomplete, but the editor's blind trust in propaganda and leftist sources make one skeptical of Cohen's appreciation for the task he has taken on. Official Communist pronouncements and stories are given the same credibility as scholarly and professional work. Thus, Nguyen Khac Vien, General Editor of the Hanoi series *Vietnam Studies* (parts of which are written in the Soviet Union) is rated alongside Douglas Pike and Jeffery Race. Just how carefully the selection was done is seen in a comparison of Parts 3 and 6: Following Part 3, the *Anthology* recommends Chapters 12-17 of Bernard Fall's *The Two Vietnams*, for the author's "meticulous analysis of developments in the South" which is "highly critical of the Diem regime and of U.S. policy generally." (*Anthology* p. 86) When finishing Part 6, however, the reader searches in vain for a suggestion to read Fall's critical analysis of North Vietnam in the same book.

The *Anthology*, then, can be viewed as a written version of the television series. It is biased, inaccurate and poorly researched; as such, it is an inappropriate aid for education. The book's reflection

on the series is clear: the editor gives special thanks to Ellison, Karnow and Litchy for spending many hours "making sure that (the *Anthology*) reflected the goals of the series."

Footnotes

1. Richard Ellison, "Vietnam as Television History", *Guide to Vietnam: A Television History*
2. Review of the series in *Indochina Chronology*, Vol. II, No. 3, July-September 1983
3. Robert Wells, "New Book Puts Vietnam in Perspective", book review for the *Milwaukee Journal*, October 1983
4. See "Brace Yourselves for PBS' 'Vietnam War' ", *Human Events*, August 6, 1983
5. Robert Wells, Note 3 above
6. For example, see Doan Van Toai and David Chanoff, "Stanley Karnow's Vietnam", *American Spectator*, January 1984
7. Stephen J. Morris, "'Vietnam', A Dual-Vision History", *Wall Street Journal*, December 20, 1983
8. Toai and Chanoff, Note 6 above
9. Quoted in the series' *Guide*, note 1 above
10. Toai and Chanoff, Note 6 above
11. Reed Irvine, "Flawed History of Vietnam", *Accuracy in Media*, January-B 1984
12. Burchett was identified as a KGB agent in Congressional hearings by Soviet defector George Karlin. See *Indochina Chronology*, Vol. II, No. 3, p. 28
13. Harriet Swift, "PBS Series on Vietnam Angers Refugees", *Oakland Tribune*, November 9, 1983
14. William F. Buckley, Jr., "Learning History at Harvard", *San Diego Union*, August 7, 1984
15. AIM, Note 11 above
16. *Human Events*, note 4 above
17. Quoted from the series' official biographical information, dated August 1983
18. Stanley Karnow, "Vietnam Today: The Problems of Peace", printed in the series' *Guide*
19. Robert Strausz-Hupe, et al., *Protracted Conflict*, p. 11
20. *Ibid.*, p. 12

21. Robert Wells, Note 3 above
22. Toai and Chanoff, Note 6 above
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Harriet Swift, Note 13 above
26. Stanley Karnow, *Bitter Seeds: A Farmer's Story of Revolution in China*, Dragonfly Books, Hong Kong, 1964; from the 'Introduction'
27. Greg Gross, "Refugees Ired Over PBS TV Series on War", San Diego *Union*, November 7, 1983
28. Toai and Chanoff, Note 6 above

JOHNNY GOT HIS PEN: JOURNALISM GOES TO WAR

One of the many controversies generated by the war in Southeast Asia is the argument concerning the role of the news media in influencing the outcome of the war. On one side of the conflict are the critics, who accuse the media of everything from bias and incompetence to high treason. Several of these critics have blamed the media for the ultimate loss of Indochina to the Communists. Below are some examples:

"For the first time in modern history, the outcome of a war was determined not on a battlefield, but on the printed page and, above all, on the television screen." – Robert Elegant, Correspondent

"The Vietnam war was lost on the television screens of the United States." – Sir Robert Thompson, Counterinsurgency Expert

"The American press corps made an indispensable contribution to destroying the morale of the American people and bringing about the defeat of the U.S." – Patrick J. Buchanan, Commentator

On the other side of the controversy are the defenders, who argue that news stories gave the only accurate picture of what was going on during the war, a necessary counter to the starry-eyed optimism that seemed to characterize official sources in Saigon and Washington. According to these observers, the accounts and interpretations coming out of the military and government diplomatic offices bore no resemblance to reality and it was the duty of the media to make the public fully aware of what was happening. Furthermore, the war itself, the deaths of hundreds of Americans every week and the general effects of the fighting, were news and the public had a right to be informed.

The debate rages. The enormity of media coverage of the war provides a vast battleground for confrontation. No other war has been so written about, filmed, commented on, editorialized and documented for the public. TV networks spent millions of dollars to