

[Act Four](#)

Opinion

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The debate over John Kelly and Ken Burns's 'The Civil War' is making us stupider

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By [Alyssa Rosenberg](#) By [Alyssa Rosenberg](#)

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November 1



Documentary filmmaker Ken Burns. (Matt Rourke/Associated Press)

Because nary a week goes by in this White House without some ridiculous controversy, Chief of Staff John F. Kelly has landed himself in the headlines again [for praising Robert E. Lee and for lamenting that](#) “the lack of an ability to compromise led to the Civil War.” And because no one in this current administration appears to be able to accept responsibility for anything, ever, press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders essentially tried to say that Ken Burns’s “The Civil War,” specifically Southern writer Shelby Foote talking about compromise, made Kelly do it.

The whole mess has prompted some observers, including New York magazine’s Jonathan Chait, to ask whether Sanders [had a point](#) — in Chait’s case, by pointing to a 14-second clip in which Foote talks about compromise and not even stopping to consider whether the context for it supported the point Kelly and Sanders were trying to make.

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Laura Ingraham's interview with John Kelly, annotated

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White House Chief of Staff John F. Kelly called Robert E. Lee “an honorable man” and said that “the lack of an ability to compromise” led to the Civil War
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(Thomas Johnson/The Washington Post)

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(Thomas Johnson/The Washington Post)

There are plenty of debates to be had about the content and influence of “The Civil War.” In any case, it’s obviously a mistake to ground your entire understanding of a seminal era in American history on not just a single text (there are far too many [excellent](#) Civil War books out there to be that lazy), but on a tiny excerpt from that text. Focusing narrowly on a lone clip rather than the sequence framing it does a profound disservice to both the documentary and the idea of careful close-reading. While I don’t expect the Trump administration to promote subtlety, Chait’s readers deserve better from him.

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The idea that “The Civil War” portrays *abolitionists* as the people whose rigidity was the problem is simply not supported by the text. The last thing we need in a moment when we appear to be governed in 140-character tweets is to encourage people to judge 14-second clips of longer works in isolation. The Foote quotation is immediately preceded by historian Barbara Fields’s clear, uncompromising argument that “if there was a single event that caused the war, it was the establishment of the United States in independence from Great Britain with slavery still a part of its heritage.” It is immediately followed by a quotation from the writer John Jay Chapman that says “there was never a moment in our history when slavery was not a sleeping serpent.” A few minutes later, the narration tells us, “Most Southerners refused to acknowledge even the possibility of changing their way of life.”

It’s also highly irresponsible to suggest, as Chait does, that “Burns ... treats [slavery] as disconnected from the war.” The first episode of the series, “The Cause,” includes an extensive discussion of the material conditions in which slaves lived, illustrated with superb and disturbing black-and-white portraiture of slaves stripped for auction, imprisoned in yokes and neck braces and covered in scars from whipping. The sequence refuses to allow the viewer to substitute a sentimentalized vision of slavery for the reality, and it foregrounds the abolitionist movement. The narration tells viewers that “what began as a bitter dispute over union and states rights became a struggle over the meaning of freedom in America,” a line illustrated by a photograph of a

black man with a cart full of skulls retrieved from the battlefield. It's clear the movie means to imply that these soldiers died so that man could live free.

This discussion of slavery takes up much more space, and occurs much earlier in the movie, than any substantive treatment of states' rights. Once secession enters the picture, "The Civil War" quotes Alexander Stephens to establish that white supremacy was absolutely central to the Confederacy and cites Mary Chestnut's diary to document the hypocrisy and racism of Southern culture.

There are elements of "The Civil War" that I don't think entirely land in the way Burns intends them to. Most notable is how the film answers the question: Is the Civil War over? Early in the documentary, the narration says, "Between 1861 to 1865, Americans made war on each other and killed each other in great numbers, if only to become the kind of country that could no longer conceive how that was possible." This optimism about the aftermath of the war does not seem as warranted today. Foote's contention that the Civil War "made us what we became, in good and bad ways," suggests a similar misplaced finality. Fields's insistence that "the Civil War is still going on, it's still to be fought, and, regrettably, it can still be lost," stands as a counterbalance to the two statements.

It was in this context that [I pressed Burns about the balance](#) between Foote and Fields in an interview that Chait cited to make his argument. When we discussed the balance between Foote and Fields in the documentary, Burns insisted to me that he thinks Fields's take on the state of the country carries the day in the documentary. I'm not sure it's clear to as many viewers as it is to him.

If nothing else, I suppose Kelly has proved Fields right: The Civil War isn't over, at least in the sense that we haven't reached a lasting agreement about the facts of the conflict and the characters of the men who fought it. It's a shame that the way we're re-litigating both the Civil War and "The Civil War" is taking us further away from the intellectual responsibility and curiosity that it would take to actually end the war for good.

Alyssa Rosenberg blogs about pop culture for The Washington Post's Opinions section.

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