



# HST 209: American History: Civil War W17 (Escobar 31664)

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## Week 2 Forum

### Meet Ken Burns

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#### Meet Ken Burns

by Joe Escobar - Saturday, January 14, 2017, 9:00 PM

**Make sure you have read How Forums are Graded. All students must follow those guidelines. After studying the required materials (videos and web linked readings), address and discuss the various questions with your group members throughout the week.**

DO NOT attempt to answer every question in a single post. In this class, forums are a place for sharing informed comments and having analytical discussions. (Forums are NOT a place for students to publicly display full essays.)

To make your POSTS, click the reply link in this, MY post. To reply to another student's post, be sure to click the reply link within in THEIR post.

IMPORTANT - SUBJECT LINES

BE SURE to use an informative subject line for your post, something that describes which question(s) you are addressing . Do NOT simply leave it RE: Meet Ken Burns. This will help keep the discussion organized.

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### **Who Could Not Like Ken Burns?**

by Timothy Lucas - Tuesday, January 17, 2017, 8:22 PM

Ken Burns is the friendly face and soft voice behind many well respected historical films usually featured on the generally kind and well respected PBS. However, from what I have seen from the first episode of *The Civil War*, and the two articles that critique the work, being friendly and soft spoken might be a problem in a piece that studies such a complex and horrifying chapter in American history.

I was about 9 years old in 1990 when the series was produced, but a year earlier the film *Glory* was released. You see back then and where I lived we were lucky to get 1 or 2 fuzzy television channels off an antenna, so renting a VHS tape for the weekend was a huge treat. I remember I threw a fit because at first they wouldn't let me watch it, but of course I eventually got my way. It blew my mind. As best I can remember and besides maybe an occasional clip or passing mention I have not sat down to watch *Glory* since that time. While I cannot recall much of the movie I clearly remember wondering, 'why was it was such a big deal that it was an all-black regiment, why only white people were in command, why did they just marched or stood in lines while white guys in flannel shirts jumped out of the bushes, what was all of this about?'...I had not yet developed a keen sense of American history or 19<sup>th</sup> century military tactics, and my parents were far from prepared to answer those questions effectively.

While I do not have the same sense of wonder and discovery I had 27 years ago, *The Cause* had far from the same impact. The two do share Shelby Foote, who served as a technical advisor to *Glory* and is featured as an on screen voice in Ken Burn's series as the kindly southern gentleman. They are certainly centered on the same war, but for me the similarities stop there. I was eager to dive into the series during the break, but was disappointed how the first movie did not spend much time setting up what I felt were the causes. It may have polluted my memory a bit for the purposes of the course plan, but I spent time either in leftover history book, reading early sections of our course book and watching other films concerning earlier periods because of how lacking I felt *The Civil War* was in setting up the period.

Until reading the articles by Bedford and Morrison, I had assumed the other films in the series would occasionally flashback to explain or at least explore important events and American society. But it seems we are either assumed by the movie to already have a firm grasp of knowledge leading up to the Civil War, or are encouraged to explore more on our own. Both of those sound great to an active student or academic working in the field, but can be a lot to ask of the average person.

That can be the nature of PBS. They have the good intention of engaging a wide audience,

but as we see at about 2:07 in the group think sessions during *Meet Ken Burns*, their presentation often falls in the middle of the road that either dulls a historical point or forces together a mix of quick snaps of historical possibilities that are too numerous to explore in detail in the context of even a 9 part series. Generating an interest in history is good until what we learn does not give proper voice to the people of the time or fails to provide knowledge beyond a mass of ideas that can leave one with too much information and not enough understanding.

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**Did you find yourself "admiring" Ken Burns and "liking" the message he presented in the video clip?**

by Jordan Okoniewski - Wednesday, January 18, 2017, 2:39 PM

I did find myself admiring Ken Burns after watching the "Meet Ken Burns" clip. This is perhaps the world's most esteemed historical documentarian, and yet he starts his interview humbly. He admits to approaching his work with a sense of "ignorance and curiosity, that allows us to have a process of discovery." This very directly reminds me of one of my favorite quotes by Socrates, "The only true wisdom is knowing you know nothing." I believe that it's so important that, if you are going to pour through the oceans of historical documents that Ken Burns sources for his films, that you try to separate yourself from your biases if you are going to learn anything. To a degree, this is impossible to do, but Ken addresses that in the next scene, showing his team of historians serving fighting over the direction the film will take. If no one can truly be neutral, it's best to have a panel of diverse people with diverse opinions.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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**Re: Did you find yourself "admiring" Ken Burns and "liking" the message he presented in the video clip?**

by Joseph Miller - Friday, January 20, 2017, 9:06 AM

That's a bold statement, your second sentence on Ken Burns being the world's most, or perhaps, esteemed historical documentarian. I looked on PBS. Top 25 documentarians, or documentaries. Guess where Ken Burns ended up. Well I didn't see him on the top 25. Michael Moore, love or hate him, 3 times on the list. This is PBS list, where Ken Burns has ethos. not on the 25 top. Why? I'm not calling you out. I'm just wondering how you came to the conclusion that he was the most esteemed historical documentarian, and what about the hundreds of others who have had far greater impact. Ken Burns got 40 million in 1990 for the civil war series. Today 400,000. Maybe, with internet and everything else. We didn't have the choices then. He sells his videos on amazon for \$69.99. Making a killing off of making history. I just want to be clear. I do

like the series, but this is exactly what the problem is with it. you yourself are saying, he's one of the most esteemed historical documentarians, and esteemed historical historians(is that right), say he's flawed. Now they have this in schools, which is why our next lesson should be on reliable sources for your essay's. This video should have a warning on it that says for entertainment purposes only. Consult your real history book to fill in the gaps.

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**Re: Did you find yourself "admiring" Ken Burns and "liking" the message he presented in the video clip?**

by Jordan Okoniewski - Friday, January 20, 2017, 1:48 PM

<http://www.pbs.org/pov/blog/news/2012/12/the-25-greatest-documentaries-of-all-time/>

Is this the list you're citing? This is a public opinion poll of the 25 greatest documentaries of all time, not a list of the 25 greatest historical documentarians of all time. There's a huge difference in criteria there. Super Size Me is on that list, which I would not call historical. I stand by what I said though - I really don't think there is any name more associated with historical documentaries. In addition to just being perhaps the most prolific historical documentarians in terms of sheer content, he's been nominated for two Academy Awards, he's won four Primetime Emmys, been nominated for seven more Primetime Emmys, won the Silver FIPA at the Biarritz International Festival of Audiovisual Programming, has been nominated for two Black Reels, won another Black Reel, won the Audience Choice Award and was nominated for two Golden Hugo's at the Chicago International Film Festival, won a Christopher Award for Jazz, won the CINE Golden Eagle in 1981 and the CINE Leadership Award in 2003, Won the Canal Award at the 2007 Deauville Film Festival, was nominated for the Directors Guild of America Award in 2008 for The War, Won the Humanitas Prize in 1991 for The Civil War, was nominated for an Independent Spirit Award in 2013 for The Central Park Five, has won the International Documentary Association Award twice and has been nominated three other times, was nominated for a Grierson Award by the London Film Festival, was given a Lifetime Achievement Award by the News and Documentary Emmys in 2008, was nominated for an OFTA Film Award in 2013, won two Erik Barnouw Awards from the Organization of American Historians, has been nominated for two PGA Awards and has won two as well, won a Golden Space Needle Award at the Seattle International Film Festival (I'll admit this one sounds a little silly), was given both a Best Documentary Award and a Lifetime Achievement Award by the St. Louis International Film Festival, has been nominated for two Grand Jurys at Sundance, won the Silver Medallion at Telluride in 1994, has won two Western Heritage Awards, won the Western Writers of America Spur Award in 1998 for Lewis and Clark, and has been nominated for a Writers Guild of America

Award for The Central Park Five. He also holds more than 25 honorary degrees from different colleges. Also if you'd have dug a little deeper into the PBS website, you'd see that on their profile Ken Burns they refer to a Reel Screen Magazine poll that listed The Civil War second only to Robert Flaherty's Nanook of the North (which came out in 1922) as the most influential documentary of all time, and named him together with Robert Flaherty as the most influential documentarians of all time. They also go on to quote David Zurawik of The Baltimore Sun, who said, "...Burns is not only the greatest documentarian of the day, but also the most influential filmmaker period. That includes feature filmmakers like George Lucas and Steven Spielberg. I say that because Burns not only turned millions of persons onto history with his films, he showed us a new way of looking at our collective past and ourselves."

I know this is a pretty extreme rebuke, but I personally don't feel comfortable making strong subjective statements unless they're justifiable. To me, this all says that I was not outside the realm of reason for suggesting that Ken Burns is "perhaps the world's most esteemed historical documentarian."

here are my sources for all of that

<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0122741/awards>

<http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/about-the-filmmakers/ken-burns>

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**Re: Did you find yourself "admiring" Ken Burns and "liking" the message he presented in the video clip?**

by Joseph Miller - Saturday, January 21, 2017, 12:33 PM

absolutely, I like your response. I went a little strong because no one was answering. I'm a debater, and I want to see what people have to say. I said from the beginning I liked the show and it's presentation. I don't normally like to take things for what they portray themselves to be, because usually there's more to it. Just like this show. I learned something from you on your post as well. Public opinion doesn't matter to you? and if you looked on that list you would have saw the Civil War series was 28th. And for the record I never questioned his film making capabilities, that's the part I admired. I see most all of those awards you listed were for film making and such. Most Influential doesn't mean, Know it all. Thanks for mentioning George Lucas. I see why we do this, I've already learned a handful of things, some regarding cinema and cinema awards, and some regarding history and how it's dished out to us.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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**Re: Did you find yourself "admiring" Ken Burns and "liking" the message he presented in the video clip?**

by Jordan Okoniewski - Sunday, January 22, 2017, 4:37 PM

Cool, I feel yah. Debate is always a good way to get the creative juices flowing, especially this early in the term.

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**Re: Did you find yourself "admiring" Ken Burns and "liking" the message he presented in the video clip?**

by Timothy Lucas - Friday, January 20, 2017, 2:00 PM

Myself and others have mentioned our admiration or at least knowledge of Ken Burns as well as our skepticism of the series we are about to watch. I wanted to bring up a part you mentioned that I also have noticed about *The Civil War* series and his work in general, as well as agree with your assessment of how the approach to his presentation can be effective.

*He admits to approaching his work with a sense of "ignorance and curiosity, that allows us to have a process of discovery."*

This also applies to the music we hear in the first episode. The video clip from *Meet Ken Burns*, at about 6:00 he states, "...we record 90% of our music before we even start editing...music becomes not something you add to amplify emotion, but something that's organic to the original emotion."

I like this approach for several reasons. Most important is that we are not beat over the head with over-production, such as a bombastic crescendo of music while the narrator comes to an important point. The music also feels authentic to what we think of it being at that time. The church chorus does give a nod to the suffering and yearning of slaves, but for the most part the sound track remains consistent all through the episode without becoming too redundant.

I listen and watch a lot of media on my phone and through headphones, so a good audio experience certainly helps me appreciate the work put in to the presentation as well as staying engaged with the content.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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**Re: Did you find yourself "admiring" Ken Burns and "liking" the message he presented in the video clip?**

by Bailey Tillotson - Saturday, January 21, 2017, 12:49 PM

I definitely agree, everything can and will be criticized because not everyone has the same views or feelings. It was nice to see that they took the time to discuss and collectively decide on things as a team, I'm sure it did create some diversity. So of course a popular historical show was greatly criticized and also admired by the same kind of people. People and historians can argue until they're blue in the face, but either way Ken Burns did make something impactful and important. Bedford wrote how superbly produced it was but how limited it was, also. She refers to Leon Litwack and Daniel Walkowitz wanting the Civil War to be told differently, despite the popularity of the series. Litwack said the series was "superbly produced history of war, not of the social revolution which the Civil War helped to unleash," he wasn't a fan of Ken Burns' work and wished to see more of the impact the war had all the way down to the ethnic minorities and women. However, I think if he were to focus on every little thing the series would be considerably longer and perhaps not the intent he had.

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**The Civil War through filmmakers eyes.**

by Nicholas Esser - Wednesday, January 18, 2017, 7:56 PM

I have already been acquainted with some of Ken Burns work, and I might already have a biased opinion on his accomplishments. I feel he has a remarkable eye for the artistic beauty of filmmaking that he shows in his documentaries. I think the effort he puts into his work is admirable seen in time spent researching for this series. However, with this familiarity I understand the concerns in the critique by Michael A. Morrison and Robert E. May saying "...Burns neatly skirts the Charybdis of too many events disrupting his narrative flow." A conflict of director vs. historian is likely to be at war with each other. With laughable amounts of time spent learning about the more controversial sides of the Civil War when I was younger, I find myself still craving to be introduced to the ideas and feelings of the average men and women that lived on both sides of the line. I hope Ken Burns film still paints a broad picture of this world so unfamiliar to me.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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**Who's the utmost authority for the utmost authority**



by Joseph Miller - Wednesday, January 18, 2017, 9:37 PM

While watching the video, I did admire Ken Burns. From the beginning, though, I knew that I was watching an interpretation. In the very beginning of the video he goes on to say that they approach their projects with ignorance and curiosity to allow process of discoveries. While I find that intriguing, I also wonder what his ethos is when it comes to history? I know he studies it and has historians and scholars working with him. I just went off the three sources given, and looked Ken Burns up on Forbes. I won't include any of that here. I wanted to see what a guy like Ken Burns makes, or puts in his pocket for creating history for us. I realize he's a film maker and that's his gig. I never would have thought to analyze this.

After reading what his fans and critics had to say, just kind of vindicated my feelings, from when I watched the video. If I could just cut and paste the whole article. As stated by Litwack, a professor of history at the University of California at Berkeley who won a Pulitzer for his book, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery*, said Burns' civil war series was superbly produced history of war, not of the social revolution which the Civil War helped to unleash. Litwack also goes on to talk about how they use voices of ethnic minorities and women who did not have the leisure to keep diaries, they relied on conventional interpretations of the war. It's Burns perspective. It's not all Litwack either. It's not one man against Burns. Daniel Walkowitz, a filmmaker and Professor of history at New York University had his concerns as well. He even goes on to say Historical reviews of *The Civil War*--unlike the praiseful write-ups of TV critics--were "at best, mixed, and on balance critical," said Walkowitz. He quoted historians who praised Burns' technique but faulted his reliance on "vintage 19th Century interpretation," who found the series "luxuriant on military detail, thin on political context," and who criticized Burns' "insistence on retaining visual beauty rather than tackling difficult questions." I'll stop there with his fans and critics.

Finally, you have us read a third source to make us even more happy, if we couldn't be the happiest already, that makes me feel even more confident I'm watching a George Lucas film, that should start off with "A long time ago in a galaxy far away". The third article just went on and on about how inaccurate the Ken Burns documentary was and quite honestly, I started to daze off wondering why am I still reading this bashing of Ken Burns.

To answer the question finally, I am confident in the historical series that we are about to watch. I feel like I will get a lot of real facts, such as dates, people, events, places, things that took place or happened. I know it's a drop in the bucket to everything out there. I like the fact that Ken Burns goes out and does his own leg work. I'm concerned his historians and scholars may need some historians and scholars for themselves, but he gets me excited. I was to begin with when I took this class. I almost got robbed for a second by trying to discredit this guy. I like the show, the music. I realize for every photograph and letter there is 20 to 30 more that don't get shown. What Ken Burns did was get people excited. I mean 40 million people showed up to watch his show on PBS. It's now in schools and is a visual

spectacle to get you interested and go deeper into it if you wish. I take it for that. How can you expect to know everything about the civil war in 11 hours? The most important thing out of all of this is a quote I'll end with this, which makes feel more confident in Mr. Escobar, because I feel that is what he's doing. I respect that. I don't want to be taught blindly. I give faith in my instructors that they are teaching me what's real. In the third source, page 2, it goes on to say First, we hope that once social studies teachers and college professors are sensitized to the series' flaws, that they will avoid uncritical classroom viewing of the production. That is, they need to engage students in dialogue about the series' misinformation, so that students do not leave class with distorted impressions about what divided our nation in 1861. Secondly, we offer this piece as a reminder of the limitations of classroom media in general as an instructional tool. Given the addiction to television and movies of so many American youths today, and their tendency to slight libraries and books, it is tempting to integrate increasing amounts of media into the high school and collegiate history curriculum. But, because of their tendency to simplify history, films are rarely an effective substitute for book-based teaching. That even Ken Burns' superior production, with its air of authority, seriously distorts that past should remind us of the risks involved every time we surrender our classrooms to the screen.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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### **Re: Who's the utmost authority for the utmost authority**

by Randi Carlton - Friday, January 20, 2017, 8:31 PM

I, so far, strongly agree with what you wrote above about how the series is a "superbly produced history of war, not of the social revolution." I definitely feel that will be my biggest hang up when going through and watching this series, as it has been already with this first episode (and I am assuming that the one titled "The Cause" will potentially have the most about the social temperature at the time of all of the episodes, which is not that much at all). After reading the critiques, I can understand the approach of making things beautiful, of putting oneself in the shoes of the discoverer, and even of rounding off dates or simplifying some facts (like the claim that Buchanan did "nothing" when in fact it is much more telling to go into what he was doing *instead*) -- this all makes it palatable, easily digestable by the viewer, by people who are not historians, which of course was the point of this series. It is pretty clever how it hooks a viewer who is not necessarily looking to learn something into learning a whole lot; for that, it is very useful, and obviously, judging by the popularity of it alone, was very successful in doing just what it aimed to do. What is most concerning to me about it, however, is the lack of illumination into the experience of African Americans at the time. That is the crux of the entire story and it is being feebly represented so far. Burns was even critiqued for saying that he thought it "radical" that he suggested at all that the Civil War was caused by slavery. *That* is a pretty strong opinion, *that* is a seriously strong bias; the exact thing that he said he was trying to avoid in the way that he approached creating his

documentaries. Stating facts is not radical, telling the truth about history is not radical, unless you are subscribing to a white washed version of history and feel that you are going against the tide by suggesting anything outside of it. I feel like that is where my research is going to lead me next; what, other than the current social climate of the time in which he said this, would lead him to think that stating something so seemingly simple and common sense as the existence of slavery being one of the main contributing factors to the Civil War as "radical"?

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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### **Re: Who's the utmost authority for the utmost authority**

by Joseph Miller - Saturday, January 21, 2017, 12:40 PM

That's all I'm trying to say as well, I'm not trying to get run over with awards he has for cinema. I love the show. My point, thank you, is that! It's most peoples view of the Civil War just because of it's popularity. Most aren't going to go out and research all the off shoots of the movie to figure everything out. There going to take the show's word for it. My issue, is that what you said. He's deciding what to put in there as a historical documentary. If it was just for show, I could care less. But for educational purposes, that's a whole new ball game.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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### **Did you find yourself admiring Ken Burns?**

by Randi Carlton - Wednesday, January 18, 2017, 9:46 PM

I did find myself admiring the message that Ken Burns was giving in "Meet Ken Burns" though I did feel skeptical about it in the context of documenting history. It is a wonderful thought to go into things with a sense of discovery and approaching one's work with "ignorance and curiosity," though particularly in the case of documenting history, this seems careless. As pointed out in the second article, a main issue is that there is an "insistence on retaining visual beauty rather than tackling difficult questions." This makes a lot of sense when a careful plot isn't being charted out on how to tackle a project, how to tell the story, what questions should be answered or at least approached, and what tone should be taken. Without decisive, hard parameters like that, difficult topics are going to be left out or not fully approached like, as Prof. Simon Schama points out, the full story of the African-American experience which is obviously crucial when discussing the Civil War.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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### Skeptical but Optimistic

by Kamron Bratlie - Wednesday, January 18, 2017, 9:56 PM

Having prior exposure to Ken Burns and his work, I have an appreciation for him as a film maker. I would say that most of his films have given me a greater idea of the scope of history in general. My personal favorite is his 2009 film on National Parks. However, I have always had a vague skepticism about his films, specifically his view on historical events. After reading the criticisms from both documents, that skepticism is valid. Most notably, the *Journal of American Culture* essay pointed to some interesting flaws in the first episode. As the essay points out his "stereotypic and misleading" (p.5) description of the Old South, I am reminded of my own time in the South, in which many a Southerner expressed to me a sense of misunderstanding from the rest of the country. That being said, I feel as if the constraints of a film or documentary series on a historical subject is going to have to make compromises, in order to carry a narrative.

Criticisms aside, this film obviously had an impact on society. Whether or not the historical accuracy is good enough or too much to ignore, is another question.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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### Re: Skeptical but Optimistic

by Joseph Miller - Thursday, January 19, 2017, 4:01 PM

A question I had, was who gets to decide the compromises. I totally agree you have to make compromises. This is an 11 hour episode about a huge event with many things happening all over the place. You can't possibly hit every one. Impossible. I get that. But it's a first hand look for most people. They watch it on PBS. That's it, that's there history lesson. Is it bias. Does it not show enough regarding slavery and how the slaves really lived and cohabitated. Why does everybody automatically think elephants, lions, tigers, giraffe's and so on when Africa comes to mind. Because of bias books and learning. Just like in the third article by Morrison and May, they point out that basically if this was the only history lesson you had on the civil war you would think slaves only picked cotton. Nay nay, they lived and worked in towns and cities; in fact, they made up about twenty percent of the population of major southern cities in 1860, according to Morrison and May. They not only "picked cotton", give you that one, they also worked in hotels and newspapers, as one man, William Wells Brown, a slave, recounts. They worked on railroads, sugar plantations, tobacco, hemp, rice farms, live stock, butlers, maids, iron workers, miners, the list goes on. Who gives Ken Burns the right to compromise. I'm not trashing him, but who gets to decide compromises. Is that the way Ken Burns wants to portray slaves? Are we dumbing this down. At least we have the book and other scholarly articles to learn from as well. I don't want to seem like I don't like the guy. If

you look on Forbes and see the interest he's generated in historical sites because of the series I commend him on that for bringing such renewed interest and excitement to it in the 90's.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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### **Re: Skeptical but Optimistic**

by Kamron Bratlie - Friday, January 20, 2017, 11:21 PM

Thank you for replying. I can see where you're coming from in your statements. Examining the detail of what is acceptable for a historical interpretation of a documentary is something that everyone should try to do, yet not many do. That being said, with the constraints of a documentary, all be it 11 hours, Ken Burns did the average person a great service. Bringing something as gruesome and tragic as the civil war to mainstream America is no easy feat. The criticisms he received were very detailed and well thought out, but not surprising in the least. Anytime you expose a specific idea to the masses, experts in that particular field always cue up to take turn explaining the short comings of whatever it is being shown. Average people need an introduction to a subject that is manageable for them, at least on a national scale. I am a geology student. I wouldn't try to explain the ins and outs of radioactive decay in basalt to a group of people with no academic exposure to geology without introducing them to the basic concepts of the subject first. That is what Ken Burns does. Dumbing down is a bit too harsh, rather, he makes things manageable for average people.

As Toplin states in the *Current.org* article, "It can't be wallpaper history; it cannot cover everything." The complexity and diversity of issues with the civil war alone cannot be covered in a single documentary. This film is meant to expose the laymen to the civil war, not reassure the historians on what they already know.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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### **Re: Skeptical but Optimistic**

by Joseph Miller - Saturday, January 21, 2017, 12:44 PM

11 hours, not enough. And to put it in perspective. We are reading a Pulitzer prize winning book on the issue. This is a supplement. It is nice to because it does expose us to al lot of facts, and people who do watch it will learn something. You can please all of the people some of the time and you can please some of the people all of the time but you can't please all of the people all the time. There's always going to be critics.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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### Feelings on Ken Burns' Work

by Bailey Tillotson - Wednesday, January 18, 2017, 11:18 PM

I found Ken Burns to be a thoughtful and analytical man, he cared about his work and wanted it done right and I can respect that. Just from the video you could somewhat see the amount of work that went into what he did. His work was well liked and as The Limitations of Classroom Media say, people liked what he showed because it was accurate and not fabricated like some of what is told to us through media. He showed history can be interesting and important, tracking down about 16,000 photos and using many direct quotes to make it quality. Well respected historians such as Don E. Fehrenbacher, James M. McPherson and C. Vann Woodward were his historical consultants and even appeared in his video (Morrison and May). Bedford quoted a professor named Robert Toplin from University of North Carolina saying "[W]hat we're all trying to do is reach the public, get them excited about history and make them want to explore and even debate the issues. That clearly is what has happened in the wake of The Civil War." and went on to say it made a positive impact. I did go on to read the criticisms about his work, but I feel that he did make a difference and to critique someone who was trying to further educate the people of our nation is silly. He didn't state wrong facts, maybe he didn't state them the way others would have or wanted him to, but he still offered a point of view of our country's past that wasn't particularly popular or well known before.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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### Re: Feelings on Ken Burns' Work

by Joseph Miller - Thursday, January 19, 2017, 4:06 PM

He did state a few wrong facts, actually. One very important part of history regarding the John Brown's raid. Said he brought along a wagonload of guns. They never used guns, they were provided a pike instead. A tool. This is even from Brown's biographer, Stephen B. Oates. How do you argue with that guy. It's just one incorrect fact.

Sum of ratings:0 (1)

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### The point of skepticism

by Nicholas Esser - Friday, January 20, 2017, 5:55 PM

I think we are getting away from the true point. I am quickly seeing what I believe we are supposed to be taking away from reading the critical reviews. The argument, as I see it, is not on the fame of Ken Burns or what may be incorrect in his work, but using his film as a tool for learning. Mr Escobar has introduced us to Ken Burns's film with skepticism, which I can only assume is not by accident. Therefore, while we are reading *The Battle Cry for Freedom*, we are gathering information while comparing and contrasting the two media forms. The fact that we are dissecting the very first segment in this series like historians ourselves is genius! We are watching these films not for enjoyment or entertainment like I imagine most of the 39 million tuned in for originally. I've delved deep into American history and its wars, especially both world wars, but the Civil War, for the most part, was skimmed when I was in school. I have very little knowledge of the concepts we are covering but as I discover them in McPherson's work I turn around and start picking apart this series like I have all the answers. It sounds like many in this group are doing the same. How many of you were surprised by how you watched "The Cause" with a historical lens that you didn't even know you had? I enjoyed watching Ken Burns's artistic take on the Civil War, and the few inaccuracies that may be present did not fly over my head as it may to less informed on the subject. This can only help our memory of events when we catch the narrator contradict what we have learned while in this class.

While we can argue about how this effects the way Americans learn and remember the Civil War, (which I feel is a perfectly logical argument platform) we as students in this particular class, I believe, can only benefit from this situation.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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### **Re: The point of skepticism**

by Joseph Miller - Saturday, January 21, 2017, 12:47 PM

I agree. Because of this whole thing with the Civil War series, it's actually opened up my mind even more on the Civil War and made me pay more attention to details that I probably normally wouldn't have.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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### **Re: The point of skepticism**

by Randi Carlton - Saturday, January 21, 2017, 8:06 PM

I was thinking about this too, how being encouraged to critique a historian is making us have to do our own research and look into the history ourselves, it's really interesting and encouraging active engagement with the subject matter which is really fun! I like that we are not just being given the material to memorize without question, but that we are being offered the material along with varying levels of criticism of it, allowing us to

make our own decisions on how to approach and absorb the material and making us have to do our own research if we want to find out just how different other re-tellings of the same historical event may be. I have to admit, the main reason I haven't really enjoyed history classes in the past is because they were basically just blind memorization of facts from one textbook.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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### **What level of confidence do I have in this Civil war series?**

by Bailey Tillotson - Sunday, January 22, 2017, 9:26 AM

I personally liked the film, no it didn't go into great detail of every little thing, but it still gave the core parts of the war. Burns said "I trusted my audience to make much greater leaps and intellectual connections than most documentary films," he knew that there was so much to such a significant event in our nation's history that he couldn't possibly cover everything. Nonetheless, I do have confidence in this film to accurately portray a general idea of the war. Toplin was one of Burn's many critics and he even said that "It can't be wallpaper history; it cannot cover Everything.", he tried to have positive and negative comments to say and as you can see he felt that you simply can't cover everything that each person wants you to. Historical films are meant to educate us, and I felt I learned a lot I didn't know prior to watching this one whether I knew each detail or more depth of the war or not.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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### **Re: What level of confidence do I have in this Civil war series?**

by Nicholas Esser - Sunday, January 22, 2017, 11:54 AM

I think you hit the nail on the head with the quote you use from Burns: "I trusted my audience to make much greater leaps and intellectual connections than most documentary films." I believe this to be true because of how vast the "gray area" of this war was and how it still seems to be a highly controversial topic. I don't think it's out of this world to assume even some historians can have a very biased interpretation of the events that occurred. For example it was not uncommon after the war, and to some degree still today, to find pockets of population that truly believed the civil war never ended. That the "lost cause" still raged on long after the war. Another angle to look at it from is that history always favors the victor. What little I learned as a child gave me the assumptions that the Union was the "good guys" and the rebels were "bad guys." This childhood notion is not shared by everyone. As a military veteran myself, I have learned it is dangerous to look at any war in this way. War is never simple. I feel that it is safe to say that no depiction of the civil war will ever be produced without conflicting opinions.

Burns gives us the challenge to make the intellectual connections ourselves. I feel Burns, for the most part, is showing the Civil War as I learned it (though in much greater detail), and it is my duty to fill in the gaps and apply deeper meaning myself.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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**Re: What level of confidence do I have in this Civil war series?**

by Joseph Miller - Sunday, January 22, 2017, 4:59 PM

What you said was something that I think about even when reading the book. That's why I titled my post Who's the utmost authority on the utmost authority. like you said even some historians can have a very biased interpretation of the events that occurred. Which to me doesn't make any sense because of the record keeping capabilities of that time. They weren't idiot's. They can all agree on dates, times, places, who was there, but reasons, and causes. there's so much involved in just the Civil War I do give Ken Burns respect to his cinema and motivational show to get people interested in the Civil War. He doe's provide a lot of facts, and as you said allows the viewer to take the next step, where ever that may be.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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**Re: What level of confidence do I have in this Civil war series?**

by Nicholas Esser - Sunday, January 22, 2017, 8:21 PM

Your right. The dates and times and even correspondence of the time are fairly easy to agree upon. The difficult factor is to assume peoples motives. Why any group of people thought they should fight for example. Did the mast majority of people in the Union fight to keep it whole, or was it to free slaves? I certainly like to imagine the later but who can say. Everyone has a different reason for why they do things and for historians it must be difficult to agree on those topics.

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**re:meet Ken Burns**

by Jordan Okoniewski - Sunday, January 22, 2017, 3:29 PM

I couldn't help but feel that the "Limitations of Classroom Media" article was just ridiculously overdramatic. Especially when the authors refer to Ken Burns' work as "not accurate history" and "so seriously flawed that the credibility of the series is brought into question." I wont deny that they address valid factual inaccuracies, but the ones they do

seem pretty benign, without agenda, and honestly not that far from the truth. For instance, “The first factual error appears in the 10 1/2 minute introduction, when he provides an incorrect date for Abraham Lincoln’s speech on January 27th 1838... Burns simply identifies the date as 1837. This sets a pattern for careless wording in the form minutes which follow.” (pg 40) Indeed, almost every problem the authors of this essay have with Burns’s work are problems of “careless wording.” However, when you actually analyze how minuscule most of these trespasses are, you have to begin to wonder if claiming that “(The Civil War) is so seriously flawed that the credibility of the series is brought into question” (pg 39) might also be careless wording.

They complain about how Ken phrased James Buchanan's impotence to stop the coming Civil War. “It is most misleading to suggest that Buchanan ‘did nothing.’” He then lists a number of things Buchanan did, only one of which was related to The Civil War. This was the attempted Lecompton Constitution, which would have made Kansas a slave state. The other two things they list are waging war against Utah based Mormons, and attempting unsuccessfully to buy Cuba from Spain. Maybe Ken doesn't give Buchanan his due, but at the end of the day, Buchanan still really didn't do much, and none of it prevented the start of the Civil War.

The authors also take offense to Burns’s description of the events of Harpers Ferry. Where Burns describes John Brown as going there with “a wagonload of guns to arms (sic) the slaves he was sure would rally to him,” In actuality John Brown mostly brought pikes, and only one slave was given a gun. Further offense is taken because Burns claimed “The slaves did not rise up, Angry townspeople did,” when in reality “the truth is that the townspeople of Harpers Ferry only fired occasional shots at Brown’s force after word got out that he had invaded the town.” Once again, this Burns’s work isn't a perfect testament to the way every single detail of the Civil War occurred 150 years ago, but all the same these complaints seem pretty trivial to me.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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**Re: re:meet Ken Burns**

by Bailey Tillotson - Sunday, January 22, 2017, 11:20 PM

I would agree they are dramatic about it, the other article we read starts off saying ““It is never just a movie,” said Judy Richardson, a producer for Blackside Inc. And on that point, at least, filmmakers and historians do agree.”. I can respect someone's opinion, but being reasonable is more important to me. The author of “Limitations of Classroom Media” saying that it is so flawed the credibility is questioned is over the top.

Maybe he wishes to be the debater of this film and it's quality, however, he isn't being reasonable. Ken Burns did something no one else did or was done, and he worked hard. I would also hate not to applaud the other people involved as well.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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### **The whole "slavery thing"**

by Jordan Okoniewski - Sunday, January 22, 2017, 3:55 PM

One thing the "Limitations of Classroom Media" criticizes about The Civil War is

"Burns' understanding of the most critical event in the nation's history is parented on the one side by the interpretations of late-nineteenth century historians who contended that the North and South, alienated by irreconcilable differences over slavery, found themselves in an intractable disagreement over the existence of the institution, and, on the other, by the wishful thinking of modern Yankee moralists." (First let me just say, if you still refer to people as "Yankees" I have a hard time not thinking your beliefs on the Civil War might be a little biased). It just bamboozles me how anyone can say that slavery wasn't the direct cause of the Civil War. I've heard the argument, as we all have, that it was actually about Federal vs. States rights, but what right are we talking about here, if not the contrived privilege to own human beings? *Battle Cry* puts it pretty plainly, when it tells the story of a non slave owning Confederate soldier who is asked by his Union captors what his stake in the fight was, and he responds "I'm fighting because you're down here" "For this soldier, as for many other southerners, the war was not about slavery. But without slavery there would have been no Black Republicans to threaten the South's way of life, no special southern civilization to defend against Yankee invasion. This paradox plagued southern efforts to define their war aims." (pg 311)

Our book (which this article references as "The most authoritative recent book length overview of the Civil War," and suggests Burns could have modeled his documentary a bit after it) puts it even more plainly on page 284 "The upper South, like the lower, went to war to defend the freedom of white men to own slaves and to take them into the territories as they saw fit, lest the white men be enslaved by Black Republicans who threatened to deprive them of these liberties."

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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### **Re: The whole "slavery thing"**

by Jordan Okoniewski - Sunday, January 22, 2017, 3:58 PM

This brings up a question that I think we should be discussing more often when we talk about states vs federal rights - does anyone think their issue is a states rights issue when the federal government has their back?

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### **What level of confidence do you have in this Civil War Series**

by Randi Carlton - Sunday, January 22, 2017, 5:33 PM

I feel like it's a good starting point; the videos are definitely packed with information that is factual and is in general a good learning tool. The part that I feel the most concerned about is the human element, and especially the African American experience, and the concept of the deeply embedded racism that even Northerners and abolitionists held, which as I am reading these criticisms, are things that are not addressed through out the video series and that the first episode either barely touched on or didn't approach at all. While I am confident that this video series will give me a lot more information than I have stored away in my head right now on this historical event, I am glad that I've been given the materials to look at this critically, and I realize it will be up to me to question and criticize certain aspects of the series and to do my own legwork on researching further into people like Frederick Douglass and into concepts that the Limitations of Classroom Media reminds us not to forget, like how segregation and discrimination against African Americans was "a way of life in the pre-Civil War North."

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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### **My critique on a critique**

by Nicholas Esser - Sunday, January 22, 2017, 9:40 PM

Though I felt there were many truths to what Morrison and May addressed in there critique, there was one section that I think damaged their rhetorical appeal. Their concerns with way Burns depicts slavery. "There is no way to escape Burns' first episode without getting the idea that almost all southerners lived on cotton plantations, that all slaves performed gang labor in cotton fields, and that all masters were sadistic tyrants who whipped slaves and broke up slave families at will." The critique goes on to say "Burns never conveys to viewers the complexity of Souths "peculiar institution."

As the reader I struggle to comprehend arguing how Burns portrayed slavery. My question would be should Burns have added slave owners that treated slaves fairly? Would viewers in today's society have a changed opinion on slavery? I would have liked a more gritty understanding of how the masses, not just politicians and landowners, felt about slavery on both sides. But personally I don't see any issues with Burns not defending slavery. The picture he painted of slavery was happening, it certainly wasn't fictional. I don't see how this aspect effects the documentary's credibility.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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