



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

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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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The unwillingness of Confederate leaders

by Josh Myhre - Wednesday, January 18, 2017, 9:00 AM

One thing I noticed in the first episode of Civil War that I found very interesting was how *unwilling* Robert E Lee and Jefferson Davis were in taking up leadership within the Confederacy (Section 1.7, "Secessionitis," and 1.9, "Traitors and Patriots"). Lee was honor-driven and had spent his whole life in the US military and fundamentally wanted to preserve the union, but he simply couldn't justify taking up arms against his "southern brothers." He considered Virginia his "home country" over and above the United States. Jefferson Davis tried to just retire to his home and tend the garden, until he was forced to take on the mantle of president when he was elected. Both of these personal conflicts are taking place within a context of EXTREME enthusiasm and fervor amongst southerners who *wanted* secession and thought they had a fundamental, constitutionally granted right to secession. Even though people were gathering in throngs, turning out to volunteer in the hundreds of thousands, and parading through the streets in favor of secession so as to free themselves from the "coercion of the North," Davis and Lee really only took up leadership in the confederacy after a small degree of coercion. They only took up leadership because they felt the war would be more bloody without them, and they couldn't take up arms against their home.

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Re: The unwillingness of Confederate leaders

by Zachary Embree - Sunday, January 22, 2017, 8:02 PM

I also find this part of history is often overlooked. Unlike in modern times the political powers and identity of the states was much different than it is today. Without the much easier travel and access to nationwide news we have today people tended to identify with their local communities and state governments. One part of the video that references this is the explanation of how Robert E. Lee was divided between his loyalty to country and his home state of Virginia. Personally I think both the book and series do a good job of showing how he was not die hard Confederate, but a loyal Virginian.

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Burns' film isn't perfect but it's pragmatic and useful

by Josh Myhre - Wednesday, January 18, 2017, 9:54 AM

I completely understand and even agree with the criticism outlined in the Morrison and May article. I was struck by how quickly episode 1 ("The Cause") glossed over all the important context of the civil war; it lasted just over 40 minutes and only covered a few white abolitionists, John Brown, a discussion of slavery as an experience, and Lincoln's election (Morrison & May, p.40). After reading chapters 8-10 in *Battle Cry of Freedom*, it's glaringly obvious how much Burns is leaving out here. *Battle Cry* seems to do a really good job giving you a really nuanced account of the *story* of the civil war; not just the battles but all of the context and background that go in to it. When reading *Battle Cry*, I'm constantly having moments of "Oh wow, that's fascinating" or "I wonder what the deal with X is?" Watching "The Cause" didn't really get me to that inquisitive point, because as Morrison and May point out, it's an over simplified explanation of events that doesn't delve too deep into the moral quandaries in the civil war era. I tend to agree when Morrison and May write "Burns' failure of imagination forces him to rely on old and discredited chestnuts to explain the southern perspective on the sectional crisis and war" (43).

However, I still think that Burns' series is worth watching and is useful in the classroom. Burns is correct when he says that he's not trying to produce an academic paper, that he's trying to speak to an extremely large audience and just wants to keep everyone engaged in history (Current.org article, p.3). Walkowitz says that there shouldn't be a binary between filmmaker and historian (Current.org, p.4). Well, based on the video link provided, Ken Burns did in fact do a significant portion of this research himself. But Burns is a professional filmmaker, not a professional historian. History is a hobby for Burns. It's hard to envision an actual historian being able to produce a film like this, that is accessible to a large and diverse audience, when *Battle Cry of Freedom* is 900 pages long and STILL doesn't cover the whole story. I think that Burns' purpose in making this series was simply to give the common person a more detailed account of what happened in the civil war than they had previously had access to, to get people *interested* in history, and I think Burns succeeds in this goal.

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Re: Burns' film isn't perfect but it's pragmatic and useful

by Zachary Embree - Friday, January 20, 2017, 10:24 PM

While I agree that the series is a very good way to get a variety of people interested in an important part of our nation's history, I still have some reservations. Mostly I think one of the negative aspects of this series could be that it spreads a misrepresentation to a large group of people. One thing that has always stuck with me is that every conflict is not a clear divide between the "good" and "evil" side. The series does not seem to reflect this very well as evidenced by the articles presented. That could end up with a lot of people getting an inaccurate view of the war itself and the reasons behind it.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: Burns' film isn't perfect but it's pragmatic and useful

by Josh Myhre - Saturday, January 21, 2017, 10:38 AM

You're absolutely right that not every conflict is a clear divide between good and evil. Motivations for going to war will always be multifaceted and complicated. But it is exceedingly difficult to present straight facts with absolutely no opinion attached to them. In the "Meet Ken Burns" video, at about the 2:00 minute mark, you see the group of historians that worked on the film discussing how *every* historical account they employ brings some sort of interpretation to the table. If we were to rely on "only the facts," all we would really have at our disposal would be dates and locations of battles, number of troops involved, etc. It's hard to have a discussion about motivations that is not itself motivated by something. I think the researchers who put together Burns' "Civil War" are very aware of this, and their interpretation of the facts are that it was about slavery. This may or may not be *true*, but it is a certain understanding of what was going on. For example, I don't think you could have a film about the civil war that is about a "theme" without an interpretation that comes attached to it. Even saying "the civil war was about states' rights and slavery" is a specific interpretation. In the same line of thought, an American-produced documentary about the Cold War would be very different from a Russian-produced documentary about the Cold War, which would also be very different from an Vietnamese-produced documentary about the Cold War, even if all three were trying to give objective accounts of the conflict.

To give a completely unbiased account would be exhausting. That's work to be done by people with PhD's who have access to loads and loads of primary resources, but when the people with PhD's then re-communicate that information to those of us with only an interest in history, it comes attached with their impressions of the material. I think Battle Cry of Freedom is a great read with a phenomenally in-depth account of motivations, but even this book isn't giving us the whole story and it's 900 pages long!

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Meet Ken Burns and the first article: Ken Bun's fans and critics have their say

by Austin King - Wednesday, January 18, 2017, 6:13 PM

Hello everyone! I look forward to making many thoughtful posts and replying to my peers in this forum and the ones to come. The important note at the bottom of our forum questions said not to answer all of the questions in a single long post, so I will be answering the first two. If asked I can still provide my answers to the other questions.

After watching the film *Meet Ken Burns* I would say that I admire the dedication that Ken Burns puts into his films. It seems that he truly cares about his career and history. Burns goes through several historical pictures, a variety of voice actors to try and fit them into the perfect roles, as well as helps to produce different compositions of music to paint a scene for his films. Going through all that work Ken Burns still seems to get enjoyment from it, and because of this I feel I can say that he enjoys his job and wants others to see history with the same giddy spirit he does.

My thoughts after reading the first article did not change. I still believe that Ken Burns loves his work and puts great dedication into creating his films. However, it seems that many historians who watched *The Civil War* criticized it for not containing every aspect of the war. To this Toplin and I have similar views in defense of the film, as he said "It can't be wallpaper history; it cannot cover everything." Just because Ken Burns could not include all aspects of history in *The Civil War* does not mean that he isn't dedicated to the creation of his films, nor does it mean that he does not care about the other aspects he decided to leave out.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Meet Ken Burns and the first article: Ken Bun's fans and critics have their say

by Josh Myhre - Saturday, January 21, 2017, 10:51 AM

I really like what you have to say here. Burns' enthusiasm for the material is really what makes the series watchable. And Toplin is right; it can't be a "wall paper history" or the series would be 200 hours long (and I think that's a low estimate!). In this regard, I think that our textbook, *Battle Cry*, complements the video really well. It's sometimes hard to follow the progression of military events when you're just reading about, but *Battle Cry* does a phenomenal job of giving you nuanced accounts of motivation. I particularly liked Chapter 9, "The Upper South's Dilemma" because it gets deep into the Southern non-slaveholding white man's motivations. I especially liked the sections on Maryland and Virginia (particularly, pages 277-290) where it discusses states' attempts at neutrality and the various conflicts between secessionists and unionists in these states. To supplement this, Burns' film gives us a detailed narrative of the military activity. Burns is obviously highly knowledgeable about the material and cares a lot about sharing this knowledge if he's willing to go to these great lengths (5 years of work!) to share it with American television audiences. You're absolutely right; Burns had to make choices about what to include and what not to include so that he could give the most informative account he could possibly give in the time he was allotted. It's a good series, we just shouldn't use it as our primary (or only) source of information about the civil war.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Is a narrative helpful

by Zachary Embree - Wednesday, January 18, 2017, 8:20 PM

When reading or watching a historical overview of any sort I find that to be interesting enough to hold my attention their needs to be an central theme. Straight listing of facts and figures fail to capture me and put me into the time period. Therefore I do like the passion and structure Burns puts into his works. I like the overall message of putting your passion into your work and being as unbiased as possible. I would also say I admire the amount of effort he clearly puts forth into his work, rather than just for making a good documentary series.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Swiss Cheese Hisory

by Melissa Garcia-Jimenez - Wednesday, January 18, 2017, 8:40 PM

After watching and reading all the required material about Ken Burns, I can honestly say I do like him and what he has done with his series of Civil War videos. When I was watching the first episode I was very intrigued with the information that was in the video. Then as I was reading the more specific critique of Ken Burns and how it stated in the text that it was "swiss cheese history", and how it did not include such topics of how slaves did not only work in the cotton field but also others worked in the tobacco, hemp, and rice field or plantations, or how not all slaves were treated horribly. In case of Joseph Davis who happened to be the brother of the confederate president Jefferson Davis he took well care of his slaves by having them housed, fed, and clothed but also provided them with medical and dental care. I can say I am confident in the information from the videos by Ken Burns but to say I am confident as having the video as a main video source of information is another story. Having short videos included in our course outline can be a good thing to include missed information. He had some good critique from other people but not one thing can include all information everything is flawed even his videos by omitting information.

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Re: Swiss Cheese Hisory

by Josh Myhre - Sunday, January 22, 2017, 9:59 AM

I think the "swiss cheese history" aspects of the series are due completely to time restraints. Air time costs money and PBS was trying out something new with the already-lengthy Civil War series. Burns had to make choices about what kinds of information to include in the series to prevent it from being too sprawling. So while it's true that not *all* slaves worked on cotton plantations, the large majority of them did (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2956.html>), and so it makes sense from a

narrative standpoint to focus on cotton plantations. But that being said, I think our textbook is really good at supplementing this information. It goes into all kinds of detail about the various social groups and competing interests at play in the build-up to the civil war.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Swiss Cheese Hisory

by Melissa Garcia-Jimenez - Sunday, January 22, 2017, 11:31 AM

Hello Josh,

Yes I do agree that air time can be a factor in missing history information. But I do like the fact that we have the textbook to fall back on for either missing information or maybe you blank something and instead of trying to find it in the episode you can easily look it up in our textbooks.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: Meet Ken Burns

by Xin Sun - Wednesday, January 18, 2017, 11:29 PM

In fact, I do not like some of his ideas, because although a picture with music makes people feel shocked, but when you enjoy the full content, this process is very boring. Its rhythm is too slow, so I can not really enjoy the background of the whole story.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: Meet Ken Burns

by Aimee Chow - Thursday, January 19, 2017, 7:57 AM

Personally, I admired Ken Burns' passion for making history films. In the video clip presented, he shows a lot of care and dedication to making his series, "The Civil War". The clip presented a more positive and promising outlook on the series, since it was coming from his point of view. However, after reading the two articles after, I was curious as to how false this series could be. The first article by Karen Everhart Bedford provides criticism on how Burns' series could be better. For example, Daniel Walkowitz mentions in the article that he found the series "luxuriant on military detail, thin on political context". I believe this is a key element when talking about history. Knowing the cause and politics involved with war is important in order for it to not be repeated in the future.

After reading the second article, there were several concerns I had. The authors of this criticism were concerned that Burns' production "conveys the pathos and ironies of the Civil War" just like any other picture on a screen, but it doesn't present accurate history and questions how credible this information is. In the video clip, Burns' mentions that they were limited on researchers involved, which caused him and his team to do that "heavy lifting". After listening to this, it makes me question how accurate this "historical film" is. However, after reading the two articles about Burns' historical work, I still have some confidence in the Civil War Series we will be studying from. I am no expert in history whatsoever, but reading between the book and episodes will give me an idea of how accurate Burns' series is.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Meet Ken Burns

by Melissa Garcia-Jimenez - Friday, January 20, 2017, 10:04 PM

I enjoyed your view on the articles. Do you think the book we are reading will cover what is not included in the videos?

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Re: Meet Ken Burns

by Aimee Chow - Saturday, January 21, 2017, 2:40 PM

Hey Melissa!

Absolutely. I believe there will be some information that will be episodes that won't be in the text, and vice versa. Everyone has different interpretations of history. Robert Toplin wrote a critique about Burns' series, and in the first article, he mentions that "making judgments concerning conflicting interpretations of facts..." should be something history filmmakers should focus on. Toplin also mentions that they should encourage the public to view different interpretations as a debate. In general, there is so much to study in history that I doubt there's a source that recorded every single piece of it. I believe having the two sources we have for this course will help us study the Civil War era as well as we can.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Concerns over accuracy



by Zachary Embree - Friday, January 20, 2017, 6:33 PM

When reading the article I think it brought to mind the problems I was seeing in the series. The introduction into the conflict I view as essential to properly understanding the conflict as a whole, yet this feels almost rushed in the series. I can tell that production is very well done and captures my attention, but that cannot substitute for in depth coverage of the material. I have not progressed far into the series yet, but already it seems that the series is trying to push the morality of the conflict without just presenting the facts and letting the viewer make their own determinations.

Two of the main problems the article brought to my attention is how some important historical figures the series left out and several errors when explaining the start of conflict. I found that the errors like behavior of the citizens during the Harper Ferry incident really distorted how I pictured what happened. Having the citizens treat Brown's crew well as indicated by Cook's statement that they were "disposed to feel kindly towards the liberators"(Morrison p.41) makes the whole thing seem more like a large civil disturbance than a heroic act against hostile townsfolk. This plays into a concern I have that the series is trying to fame the Civil War as a more clear-cut, good versus evil than the complicated long term issue that it was. While the latter may be more interesting and easier to craft a narrative from that does not mean it clearly explains what actually happened. One instance of this simplification was pointed out in the second article on the issue of the Virginia state convention. I must agree that claiming Virginia was a lost cause when only a fraction of delegates were pushing for immediately leaving the Union was inaccurate and a simplification of the issue.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Concerns over accuracy

by Aimee Chow - Sunday, January 22, 2017, 3:16 PM

Hi Zachary,

I agree with your concerns about the accuracy of this series, as it appears several critics are as well. I question the accuracy because I believe history has so much information that it'd be difficult to comment on it without having an opinion about it. How accurate can other sources be if we have different interpretations of the Civil War? Maybe by the end of this course we'll create our own views of this piece of history based on the information we've received from the episodes and readings.

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**Re: Conerns over accuracy**

by Zachary Embree - Sunday, January 22, 2017, 7:15 PM

I agree that using several sources to create our own view of the civil war is a goal for this class. One of the good things about having a more factual account in the textbook and an emotional experience in the video is that it allows us to form a better overall view of the subject. As long as we keep in mind the proven facts forming an emotional connection to the subject is in my opinion a critical part of understanding part of history.

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**Re: Interested but Cautious**

by Zachary Embree - Sunday, January 22, 2017, 7:43 PM

I am confident that despite making some initial errors when it concerns how the tensions built up into a war, that this series will give an interesting and useful look into the war. Part of this confidence comes from my belief that certain missing facts may just be the result of not being able cover this complex issue in a TV series, much like article said "It can't be wallpaper history; it cannot cover everything."(Toplin p.3)

Unlike the more murky political and social movements of the 1860s the progress of the war I believe is more clear cut and easier to present factually. In addition to this there is a large amount of documentation and reports to better inform historians. With the Civil War Series I am in particular looking forward to hearing the multiple viewpoints from people directly involved in the conflict. One thing this series has done very well so far is bringing this large conflict down to the perspective of the common person in that time period.

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