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Vietnam War focus of new documentary

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Documentary filmmakers Ken Burns and Lynn Novick visited the Command and General Staff College to screen portions of their new 10-part, 18-hour documentary series, "The Vietnam War," and participate in a panel discussion Sept. 8 in Eisenhower Auditorium. CGSC faculty and students attended.

"This war is part of our history and a big part of our curriculum here is American military history," said Dr. James Martin, CGSC dean of academics.

Martin said the command saw the film screening as an opportunity to expose CGSC students to an in-depth production about military history. He said none of the students were born during the Vietnam Era, but several have relatives who were involved.

"The Vietnam War means something to many of these contemporary soldiers who fought that same kind of irregular warfare in stability operations as happened in Vietnam," Martin said. "Although generations removed, they had to deal with many of the same problems that existed in this film."

During his introduction to the elements of the screening, Burns said he and Novick believed the Vietnam War was the most important event in American history since World War II. He said intellectual and emotional seeds planted by numerous events during the Vietnam Era have contributed to societal dynamics that affect contemporary culture.

"We intended to try to get at the heart of a war that many people would prefer to ignore," Burns said. "The 42 years since the fall of Saigon has provided an opportunity for extraordinary scholarship."

Burns said the seven clips shared with the CGSC audience totaled 46 minutes. He said the screening represented less than one-20th of the entire film.

"Much (of the documentary) will be left out today," Burns said. "It's somewhat disturbing to Lynn and me, having worked for 10 years on this film, only to show you just clips and have you parachute in without the complete back stories."

Burns has been making documentary films for nearly 40 years. Since being nominated for an Academy Award in 1981 for "Brooklyn Bridge," he has proceeded to direct and produce acclaimed historical documentaries, including "The Civil War," "Baseball" and "Jazz."

"We interviewed Americans who fought in the war and others who opposed it, as well as combatants and civilians from both North and South Vietnam," Burns said. "The series includes rarely seen and digitally remastered archival footage from sources around the world, photographs taken by some of the most celebrated photojournalists of the 20th century, historic television broadcasts, home movies, and even some of the secret audio recordings from inside the Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon administrations."

After the screening, Martin moderated the panel discussion among Burns, Novick and Dr. James Willbanks, General of the Army George C. Marshall chair of military history and former director of the CGSC Department of Military History, followed by a segment of audience questions. He said Willbanks served as a consultant to the filmmakers and was responsible for Burns and Novick accepting the invitation to visit Fort Leavenworth.

"We have the largest military history department in the country, and we have incredibly talented historians," Martin said. "It was our goal to give (students) an opportunity to ask (questions) of people who have delved into this war now at a level very few people have."

Willbanks is a Vietnam veteran and said he wanted to ensure the stories of those who went without objection were represented in the film. Overcoming personal reservations was necessary, too, he said.

"At one point, I offered not to be part of the project because I thought a historically relevant part of the story wasn't being told," Willbanks said. "But, (Burns and Novick) convinced me to stay and be interviewed (to be a representative of the perspective of those who served without protest)."

Burns said the filmmakers decided not to have any historians in the film unless they had been on active-duty service during the war. He said Willbanks, both a historian and veteran, was one of the project's "ringers" and integral to its historical essence.

"He's an incredibly intelligent man who knows his stuff — and we took advantage of his expertise," Burns said. "We ultimately did two interviews with



PHOTO/ PRUDENCE SIEBERT, FORT LEAVENWORTH LAMP

Dr. James Willbanks, General of the Army George C. Marshall Chair of Military History, Command and General Staff College; filmmaker Lynn Novick; filmmaker Ken Burns; and moderator Dr. James Martin, CGSC dean of academics, answer questions from the audience during a presentation about Novick's and Burns' 18-hour documentary "The Vietnam War" Sept. 8 at the Lewis and Clark Center. Willbanks is one of the Vietnam veterans featured in the 10-part series. Photo by Prudence Siebert/Fort Leavenworth Lamp

(Willbanks) because he would come up with such perfect phrases to describe situations we confronted.”

Novick is an Emmy and Peabody Award-winning documentary filmmaker. She has been producing and directing films about American history and culture for nearly 30 years. Her film credits include “Prohibition,” “Baseball,” “Jazz,” “Frank Lloyd Wright” and “The War.”

Novick said “The Vietnam War” tells the story as never before. She said the series explores all sides of the human dimensions of the war through the voices of its witnesses.

“We screened 79 people during the 18 hours of the film, which was an aggregation of getting to know so many remarkable people in the United States and Vietnam, then hearing their different perspectives,” Novick said. “We began to understand all of these various points of view were needed to get a sense of an event as complicated as this. ... You just have to be open and listen.”

Burns said Dr. Roger Spiller, another CGSC historian, contributed to the film as a subject matter expert and worked on the film for more than a decade.

“I’m sorry he wasn’t able to cross the finish line and accept the accolades that he as well as (Willbanks) deserve,” Burns said.

Spiller, who died in August, served at CGSC as a professor of combined arms warfare, director of the Combat Studies Institute, and became the first General of the Army George C. Marshall chair of military history.

Martin said the film wouldn’t modify CGSC curriculum, it is a reinforcement of history that will likely pique broader interest among CGSC students and others.

“This was a good experience while these students are deciding what they may want to write about on their thesis, or what they may want to study if they go to (the School of Advanced Military Studies),” Martin said. “This film may direct them in a different scholarly direction than they may have taken before being exposed to it.”

Burns said the film is important because it presents unresolved issues that contribute to current societal dysfunctions.

“We see the hyper-partisanship and the inability to have civil conversations among differing ideas of today as a manifestation from the Vietnam War,” Burns said. “The film provides a new perspective on the war that might permit a civil discourse about it.”

“The Vietnam War” premieres at 7 p.m. Sept. 17 on PBS.