



Grupo de Investigación
Historia Militar

Attempted Reconciliation:
The Role of Karl Marlantes in Burns & Novick's 2017 Documentary *The Vietnam War*
The United States Marine Corps, Viet Nam, & Karl Marlantes

Karl Marlantes, United States Marine Corps (USMC) veteran and author, featured heavily in Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's 2017 documentary *The Vietnam War*.

Marlantes' service in the Viet Nam war, as a First Lieutenant USMC Infantry Officer from October 1968 to October 1969, garnered him a Navy Cross, a Bronze Star, two Commendations for Valor, two Purple Hearts, and 10 Air Medals. The USMC University details various periods of their history in Viet Nam, starting with the "Advisory and Combat Assistance Era, 1954-1964" and finishing with "The Bitter End, 1973-1975" (USMCU.edu).

Marlantes served during what the USMC University titles "The Defining Year, 1968" and "High Mobility and Stand Down, 1969" (usmcu.edu). 1968 and 1969 included critical battles during the Tet Offensive in March of 1968, as well as "drama" at Khe Sanh (usmcu.edu). In 1969, the US Marine Corps gradually "reduced forces" while also beginning Operation Dewey Canyon. Karl Marlantes' time in Viet Nam dovetailed with these events, though his regiment was often assigned to do more "off grid" missions, which influenced his semi-autobiographical novel *Matterhorn* (2010). Marlantes also wrote a non-fiction book about his time in Viet Nam, *What it is Like to Go to War* (2011). His most recent novel, *Deep River*, centers on the early days of Finnish settlers in the Pacific Northwestern area of the United States. *Matterhorn* and *What it is Like to Go to War*, however – as well as Marlantes' somewhat dramatic story detailing how he eventually went to Viet Nam while adrift on a Rhodes Scholarship in England – is what earned him place of honor in *The Vietnam War*.

Romancing Vietnam: Burns & Novick's *The Vietnam War*

September 2017 saw the release of Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's 10-episode documentary *The Vietnam War* with the Public Broadcasting System (PBS). The film sought to act as "an example of how to calmly assess episodes fraught with passion and sorrow" and aimed to help heal the innumerable wounds the war inflicted (Will 2017). Whether or not Burns and Novick succeeded in this endeavor remains a subject bandied about by critics. Noted Vietnam War historian Dr. Christian G. Appy posted a running commentary on the series while it aired, noting that while he couldn't think of anyone who "has shaped modern American historical memory more persistently, prolifically, and successfully than Ken Burns," definite flaws emerged upon viewing the film (Appy 2017). Vietnam Veterans for Factual History (VVFH), a Texas-based group made of Vietnam veterans, scholars, and historians, blasted the film in an open letter to Burns and Novick, arguing that "[t]he film portrays U.S. support for South Vietnam as blustering, blundering jingoism and the choice of music, graphics, and interviewees demonstrates a bias in favor of the militant leftist anti-war clichés of the 1960s" (Harper 2017). VVFH also compiled a comprehensive transcript of the film, including how much "air time" separate individuals received as well as errors in the film's larger narrative; counter-essays take umbrage with several of what they call "docu-tainment¹." Antiwar activists, however, felt that the antiwar movement was marginalized; it appears that neither side, despite the film's ethos of bringing disparate views together, felt rightfully represented.

¹ Phrase heard in person at Texas Tech University's Vietnam Center & Archive "1968 and the Tet Offensive" Conference, April 27, 2018, substantiated by the organization's website about the documentary, https://wiki.vvfh.org/index.php/Main_Page.

The main quarrel that many have with the film is the route Burns and Novick took in regard to who they featured in the film and a not-so-hidden antiwar agenda that many felt was clearly put forward. Military and diplomatic historian Mark Moyar took the documentary to task in his article “A Warped Mirror” for *City Journal*, writing that the filmmakers took sides on controversial issues and purposefully mislead the audience by leaving out context and facts. Ultimately, Moyar wrote, Burns and Novick “could have achieved something close to the impartial account they promise[d]” if they had “included contrasting examples that support the competing schools of thought on the war” (2017). One of these contrasting examples would have been a clearer inclusion of Vietnamese voices; the North is well represented, yet the role of the United States’ allies, the South Vietnamese, is often glossed over. When the film’s narrator notes the amount of South Vietnamese who died in the war, “we’re never told why so many South Vietnamese were willing to die for a government as corrupt and unpopular as the documentary suggests” (Moyar 2017). Ho Chi Minh receives a great deal of screen time, and the film attempts to explain the leader’s popularity without equal contrast given to South Vietnamese leaders who operated during Ho’s multi-era quest for Vietnamese independence. Ho most certainly did not act alone, did not always act with benevolence, and not all of his cohorts ended up in the North Vietnamese military.

North Vietnamese military victories, like Ap Bac, are celebrated, whereas American or South Vietnamese battles won rarely receive much recognition, and the South Vietnamese soldiers continue to be painted into a “lesser than” corner in regard to their place in combat. South Vietnamese veterans Nguyen van Thai and Nguyen Phuc Lien wrote a response essay on this bias and omission, noting:

We fought because we understood the cruelty and dictatorship of the communists. We fought because we did not wish the communists to impose a barbarous and inhuman regime upon us. More than 1,000,000 people from North Vietnam fled their native land and emigrated to the South in 1954 in order to escape totalitarianism, which is ample evidence for this point. The second exodus of the 70's, 80's and early 90's also corroborated this fact. (qtd. Moyar 2017).

Lien and Thai's inclusion of the post-war refugee "exodus" underscores the truth that the war fought in Vietnam did have two clear sides; one of those sides believed communists to be "barbarous" and "cruel." This side of the North Vietnamese is not amply reflected in the film; Vietnamese atrocities are generally restricted to those committed on Americans; the Northern Vietnamese brutality on its citizens during and after the Battle of Hue, for example, get at best a surface mention.

The filmmakers' continued reliance on historian Geoffrey C. Ward (who also wrote or co-wrote the historical outlines for many Burns' war films, including *The Civil War*, and the WW2 documentary *The War*) is also questionable; historians whose sole research focus is the Vietnam War would have likely written a more comprehensive, middle ground narrative (PBS 2017). Moyar points out that, while the research for the film was robust, "Burns and Novick restricted their on-camera interviews to individuals who participated in the war, leaving out historians, aside from those who were also veterans" (Moyers 2017). This strategy works well in regard to the general inclusion of Vietnamese voices (long absent from most American narratives of the war), and it is an important success that this film included Vietnamese veterans. And while it is undeniable that these empirical sources carry great authority and value, and veterans clearly present important perspectives on history, their opinions and observations don't necessarily make

them historians. But perhaps what Burns and Novick needed for their *Vietnam War* were veteran historians, people who were on the frontlines and saw the horrors of war firsthand; perhaps their target audience was not the critics, historians, or even the veterans. *The Vietnam War* appears to be designed as a route toward understanding for those who had little to no exposure to the war. Like Burns' *The War* (2007), this film's modus operandi is to educate its audience. What's most curious about this education, however, is whom Burns and Novick selected to teach the lessons of Vietnam.

The Vietnam War official cover photo features two people: a "reflected" Vietnamese farmer *under* an American soldier. The soldier's gun – like all the other weapons mentioned so far on all the other cover materials – is visible but not in use. In the distance, by the soldier's head, is a helicopter, a nod to the "first helicopter war" as much as a pointed reference to further firepower (or the promise of evacuation). These simple promotional images on Burns' works' packaging tells us that war = weapons. The weight of the individual who carries the weapon is the main story of war, per Burns.

Karl Marlantes & *The Vietnam War*

Less than five seconds into Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's much-anticipated 10-episode documentary *The Vietnam War*, after scenes of a small-town Veterans Day parade in the 1960s juxtaposed against images of the Vietnam War – helicopters lifting bodies in the jungle and combat footage – the audience hears the voice of author and Vietnam War veteran Karl Marlantes. Best known for his epic Vietnam War novel *Matterhorn* (2010), Marlantes also wrote a non-fiction book, *What it is Like to Go to War* (2011), which attempts to explain the combat soldier's perspective on and off the

battlefield. This latter publication reflects the bulk of Marlantes' on-screen time; he appears in seven of the ten episodes, commenting on the war along with broader statements regarding culture and human nature. In an iTunes featurette included with the series download, Marlantes can be seen in collaborative writing and editing sessions for the film. At a Q&A during the annual Texas Tech University Vietnam Center and Archive conference this year, historian, veteran, and film subject James H. Willbanks acknowledged that he'd done close to five hours of interviews for the film; we see him for less than five minutes on screen (Wilbanks, 2017). Marlantes is one of the most featured veterans; the heavy use of his voice indicates his voice and ethos resonated with the underlying agenda Burns and Novick hoped to achieve in their film. He can tell the story of the savagery of war while still assisting the filmmakers' need to keep war – even the ones they disagree with – on a pedestal. *The Vietnam War* might be a divisive film, but it continues to shape war into a mythical, romantic creature in the same vein of the other two Burns and Novick war films.

Romanticization of war is always present in Burns' films. The director admits that he knew while making the World War II documentary *The War* (2007) that “there was no way [he and Novick] could avoid telling [the story of Vietnam]” and that the filmmakers were “really obligated” to make the documentary (*PBS Previews*, 2017). In regard to timing, Burns notes that “historical presentation” requires “the kind of triangulation” of decades passing, while Novick asserts that the war is “unfinished business” of American history that can't be moved past without “understanding” (*PBS Previews*, 2017). The filmmakers make certain to frame the film as “not an answer, but a set of questions about what happened,” but even this assertion – that the film is not taking a stance in any way,

but rather just presenting facts – is made over the now legendary Ken Burns “zoom” video effect of a soldier standing, gun on hip, against a blue “anywhere” sky (*PBS Previews*, 2017).

But what happened was really just another war – at least in the Burns method of depiction. The primary image (used as the thumbnail on internet and TV downloads, the background to the website, and the DVD cover) from Burns’ *Civil War* is a cannon. Neither “side” of the war is depicted (there are no people in the image), but one of the war’s main weapons of destruction is set against a sunset – poignant, beautiful, romantic and bygone. The searing, iconic sunset images of O’Selznick’s *Gone with the Wind* may have been an influence. For his film on World War II, Burns chose an “everyman” soldier to represent the film’s DVD and accompanying book cover. The soldier is white, American, and haunted-yet-determined looking; again, a weapon is part of the larger picture, as the soldier has his gun slung visibly over his shoulder.

While Marlantes carried a few weapons in Vietnam as a First Lieutenant in the United States Marine Corps, his primary post-war career is that of a “known author” in Vietnam War studies. He isn’t as prominent a Vietnam War novelist as, say, Tim O’Brien or Phil Caputo (both of whom appear in the film *and* in freshman composition course textbooks). But as the first person to speak in the film, Marlantes sets the tone for the movie. Also, since he is always identified as “Karl Marlantes, Marines 1969” when on screen, his status as a Vietnam War veteran sets a bar for authority (*The Vietnam War* 2017). Marlantes speaks before he is seen in the first episode of the series, and his final question – “What happened?” – repeated twice, serves as the thesis to the entire documentary:

Coming home from Vietnam was close to traumatic as the war itself. For years, nobody talked about Vietnam. We were friends with a young couple and it was only after about 12 years that the two wives were talking, that we found out we both had been Marines in Vietnam. Never said a word about it, never mentioned it. And the whole country was like that. It was so divisive, and it's like living in a family with an alcoholic father – “shh, we don't talk about that.” Our country did that with Vietnam and it's only been very recently that I think that the baby boomers are starting to say: “What happened? What happened?” (*The Vietnam War* 2017).

Burns & Novick employ a new (for them) editing technique after this question: reversed (re-wound) video of iconic film from the war (bombs dropping, the “Napalm Girl,” Kent State, etc.). This literal rewind of history speaks to the film's insistence in trying to “talk about” Vietnam, the “alcoholic father” that the “whole country” kept hushed up. The film's juxtaposition of Marlantes's words against video of parades honoring World War II veterans underscores the opposite treatment the Vietnam Veterans received; there were rarely parades celebrating their war. Marlantes' introduction to the war acknowledges that the war was a sore spot even among veterans – he doesn't find out his friend served until they'd known each other for 12 years – as well as the rest of the country.

SLIDE

Marlantes notes that interest in the war has only been “very recently” a topic of conversation among the generation that came of age during the heaviest era of the war – the “baby boomers.” Burns & Novick fall into that age group, but is this also their target audience? When the two directors follow their reversed introductory video footage with (former Secretary of State and National Security Advisor) Henry Kissinger's instructions that “[w]hat we need now in this country is to heal the wounds, and to put Vietnam

behind us,” this speaks directly to the directors’ and Marlantes’ shared generation, but it also presents a very clear image of the war to those who don’t have any memory of the war: the film, bolstered by Marlantes’ perplexed introductory question, “what happened?” asserts that the war remains a difficult topic globally, and that the US’s involvement in Vietnam, frankly, was a messy mistake that needs to be “put behind” the American national psyche.

How Burns & Novick use Marlantes to push their agenda of healing the wounds of the Vietnam War is curious; the average audience member doesn’t know who Karl Marlantes is, besides a United States Marine Corps (USMC) veteran, until the final episode, when he is identified as an author. He does not, like Tim O’Brien, read from his works in the film or reference his laborious writing about the war; in no way does he indicate his publication credentials. Instead, Marlantes serves as a general commentator on the war, much like Vietnamese writer and veteran Bao Ninh, who appears in nearly every episode as a sort of translator for the North Vietnamese point of view throughout the war. Ninh is primarily identified as a veteran, not an author. *The Vietnam War* uses several authors – Vietnamese and American – to sharpen its points, yet many critics have been quick to point out the lack of a variety of voices. The film attempts to navigate a middle ground, but, from the outset of the film, Burns and Novick admit that “...the uncomfortable truth is that whereas the war was in one sense an aberration from America’s character, it was also an expression of it” (*The Economist*, 2017). Marlantes echoes this idea of a flawed America several times in the film.

He appears visibly upset when he discusses his “bitterness about the political powers of the time” and those powers’ “lying” (*The Vietnam War* 2017). Marlantes often

takes the role of a reflective, logical commentator on the war, and as he methodically unpacks his feelings about the war and its political navigators, Burns & Novick juxtapose Marlantes' face with images of military funerals, complete with be-flagged caskets and 21-gun salutes – in short, images usually associated with heroism, sacrifice and valor appear with a narrative of disillusionment and anger:

I can understand a policy error that is incredibly incredibly painful and kills a lot of people out of a mistake, if they made that with noble hearts. That's was, y'know, what Eisenhower and Kennedy were trying to figure out. And you read that, you know, McNamara knew by '65, which was three years before I was there, that the war was unwinnable – that's what makes me mad. Making a mistake, people can do that, but covering up mistakes – then you're killing people for your own ego, and that makes me mad. (*The Vietnam War* 2017)

Marlantes adheres to a popular historical trope in his recollection and Burns and Novick's re-telling: Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy were the “decent people” who began the Vietnam War “in good faith ... out of fateful misunderstandings,” but McNamara, Johnson, Kissinger, Nixon, and Ford “prolonged [the war] because it seemed easier to muddle through than admit that it had been caused by tragic decisions” (*The Vietnam War* 2017). Marlantes also notes that mistakes are inevitable, but “killing people for your own ego” denotes a line crossed. Investing American troops in an “unwinnable” war does not endear many a politician to their people, and Marlantes' lasting loyalty and respect for the Marines doubles down on the idea of the war as a waste.

The film introduces the war as a topic up debate in regards to waste; trusted Burns narrator Peter Coyote intones “those who lived through it have never been able to erase its memory, have never stopped arguing about what really happened, why everything went so badly wrong, who was to blame, and whether it was all worth it” in the first few

minutes of episode one (*The Vietnam War* 2017). Marlantes simply represents another voice trying to make sense of it all. His loyalty to the Marine Corps, however, bolsters his argument that the faults of the war lie on the shoulders of the politicians, not the soldiers:

You have these 19-year-old kids with these huge hearts. They will do what you ask them. The issue is are you asking them to do something worthwhile? That's up to the adults, and that's where the failure comes. [...] The responsibility is on the grownups to make sure they're not being wasted, 'cause they'll do what they're told, and they'll do it well. (*The Vietnam War* 2017)

This commentary, from the seventh episode of the series, lobs the failure of the Vietnam War on “the adults”; young Marines do their jobs well, per Marlantes, but their efforts are “wasted” on causes not “worthwhile” (*The Vietnam War* 2017). Warriors, according to Marlantes, do their job “well” because they are young, with “huge hearts” and don’t “even ask you a question” (*The Vietnam War* 2017). As a 1st and later 2nd Lieutenant in the Corps, Marlantes was actually one of the “adults”: as an officer, he ordered and led troops, asked them to do things, so thus he was also a “grown up” with the “responsibility” of not wasting “warriors.” This is a topic he reflected on at length in his non-fiction book *What it is Like to Go to War*. He devoted an entire chapter to a more holistic training of soldiers, for their own benefit (“The Enemy Within”), and another to helping soldiers adjust to civilian life after combat (“Home”). Marlantes’s priority, still, are the “kids [with the] huge hearts.” Of course, this was also Marlantes *job*, and the film makes several pointed efforts to depict the veterans of the war (on all sides) as heroic in their own right, a long overdue sentiment in US films and books about the Vietnam War. Burns and Novick, as well as most of the veterans featured, argue that they were armed pawns in a larger political game.

Marlantes as the Ideal Soldier

Marlantes notes – and Burns and Novick seize on his and others’ similar admissions – that many of the soldiers fighting in the Vietnam War were aware that the war was mired in doubtful intentions. Marlantes was in the Marine Reserves before he entered Yale University, and was deferred from active duty thanks to a Rhodes scholarship; he made it all the way to Oxford University, and then decided to forgo his scholarship in favor of rejoining his friends in the Corps in Vietnam. *The Vietnam War* glosses over the soul-searching Marlantes’ did before making this decision, which is detailed in *What it is Like to Go to War*. In his book, Marlantes describes struggling with conflicting desires; he does not want to be a “cocktail critic²” but, “by the fall of 1967 [Marlantes] couldn’t defend the war politically... [the war] was a mistake” (Marlantes 2011, p. 135). Marlantes considered deserting “the wrong war” and “pulled all of [his] scholarship money from the bank and went to Africa, harboring some vague idea that maybe Algeria and exile wouldn’t be all that bad” (2011, p. 137). After “smoking all the hash and kif” he could find, Marlantes decided to “face the music” and serve in Vietnam. This back-story behind his decision to serve in a war he didn’t believe in includes a love-lost story; Marlantes spends a few pages of *What it is Like to Go to War* lamenting how his decision ended his relationship with his first love, Meg. Feeling torn between being a war hero and staying safe with your sweetheart isn’t necessarily a unique story, and the additional period of drug use and escaping the situation is a pretty common path for many

² “Earlier, in September, my commander in chief, President Lyndon Johnson, had given a speech in El Paso, Texas [...] In his speech, Johnson had made a remark about ‘cocktail critics,’ people who bitch about things at cocktail parties but never had to face any of the hard choices” (Marlantes 2011, p. 135).

conflicted youth (including those who enlisted in recent American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan), yet none of Marlantes' backstory is included in the documentary. Instead, Marlantes is a scholar and a patriot, the son of a World War II veteran who fought in the Battle of the Bulge and had a wobble before ultimately deciding to go to war.

As he reads the letter he wrote home to his parents regarding his decision to give up his scholarship and go to Vietnam in the Burns and Novick film, the earnest and idealistic views of a young man about to go to war are juxtaposed with images of coffins, American flags, a combat zone, soldiers gearing up, a camp, a man saluting, a young man walking making peace sign, and finally a young Marlantes' signature on the original letter. His "any guy" appeal is made through the images, but his letter is more complex; his intelligence is evident as he parses out his feelings for his family.

The young Marlantes believed "... the US is absolutely wrong to be in the war. A lot of people are dying for no good reason" (*The Vietnam War* 2017). He acknowledged that the war's effect on him resulted in feelings of "increasing rage and frustration, and a complete feeling of helplessness" and he thought that he has "been hiding" and admits his decision to join his compatriots is "a highly immoral thing. [He] will be taking part in one of the greatest crimes of our century" (*The Vietnam War* 2017). From this perspective, Marlantes becomes a delightful paradox for Burns and Novick; an anti-war Rhodes Scholar whose loyalty to his sense of duty overrode his "get out of Vietnam free" opportunity. But Marlantes' youth – framed in the film as a moment of masculine triumph – seeps through in the final sentences of his letter home: "I can do something. That is I can do my very best to get 40 kids out of Viet-nam [sic] alive. And if I have to turn into an evil machine to do it, then by God I will." (*The Vietnam War* 2017). The

illusion that *any* action would be better than inaction (or at least fulfilling his scholarship), and that becoming a different person – “an evil machine” – will make a difference, ultimately drives Marlantes decision. He swears “by God” that his heroic mission to bring back “40 kids from Vietnam,” and he sounds just a foolish as he does heroic.

He willingly joins the fight in a war he sees as “one of the greatest crimes of our century” to pacify his anger and ego – an irony, based on his earlier comments on politicians, that Marlantes does not miss. In both his book, *What it is Like to Go to War*, and *The Vietnam War* documentary, Marlantes stresses that he “felt like I was gonna let [my friends, the guys I’d trained with] down. That by not joining in with them and sharing the burden, then I wouldn’t be a decent person. That’s a mixed bag because I went over there to kill people for, you know – is that why I did that?” (*The Vietnam War* 2017). In historical *esprit d’corps* – “we few, we happy few,” “brothers in arms,” and similar battle bonds that echo back to Greek and Roman literature – this motivation to join the fight isn’t bizarre or unique, and, furthermore, the US Marine Corps is notorious in its ability to make cohesive, “always faithful” brotherhoods. But Burns and Novick use this vignette or Marlantes’ internal struggle to illustrate the greater moral morass of the war from the American perspective: the war served as a call to action.

The time Marlantes spent “in country” did not include winning the “hearts and minds” of the Vietnamese in CAG³ units or walking through villages and hamlets. As the Executive Officer of Charlie Company, First Battalion, Fourth Marines, Third Marine Division, Marlantes stayed largely south of the DMZ, fighting over hills in jungle battles.

³ Combat Applications Group – generally used in the Vietnam War for pacification tactics.

The Burns and Novick documentary emphasized that Marlantes' "unit was fighting the same sort of war, over the same terrain that Marines had been fighting now for four years," one of the rare areas where Marlantes' books and the documentary converge (*The Vietnam War* 2017). The soldiers in Marlantes' novel *Matterhorn* retake the same hill several times over, and Marlantes discusses his plot's autobiographical roots in *What is it Like to Go to War*. Prior to an extended cut of Marlantes' describing a battle scene that is featured in both of his books, Marlantes frankly addresses the often-overlooked dullness of combat:

You would hear 'Well, it's going to be Operation Purple Martin I or Operation Scotland II' and it'd be like, 'yeah, whatever.' What that meant to us that someday soon some choppers are going to show up and drop us into the jungle someplace or a valley north of us or wherever it was going to be, and then we'd be off the hill and humping, as we called it. (*The Vietnam War* 2017)

His insouciant "yeah, whatever" and purposeful emphasis on the vagueness of his missions – "into the jungle someplace or a valley north of us or wherever" – underscores the suspended time of battle. A great deal of time is spent waiting, walking, moving forward and back, with little real knowledge of exactly what space on earth one really occupies. The landscape is blurred. What stands out, per Marlantes, is combat.

Marlantes concludes *What it is Like to Go to War* arguing that the experience of the overt masculinity of war needs to be tempered with a feminine nurturing energy; his book tour talks, books, and comments in *The Vietnam War* all echo his enduring thesis of the innate aggression of humanity. He likens combat to "crack-cocaine," and depicts the experience with similar mind-altering imagery: "It's an enormous high but it has enormous costs [...] You're scared, you're terrified, you're miserable, but then the fighting starts. And

suddenly everything is at stake: your life, your friend's lives. It's almost transcendence because you're no longer a person" (*The Vietnam War* 2017). The combination of "exhilaration" and "savage joy in overcoming your enemy," Marlantes posits, gives combat a primordial angle.

This insight into what fighting in Vietnam was like appeals to the film's audience, and the imagery of combat troops in the jungle, emptying magazines in battle, reminds the audience what war looks like as they hear what it "feels" like. Burns and Novick's use of Marlantes' combat description is purposeful. Marlantes taps into a gritty poetry of war; he is able to work big ideas of "transcendence" and "savage joy" (divinity and humanity) into a sound bite. The act of war retains the romantic, mysterious energy that Burns and Novick have a history of perpetuating.

The Power of One Voice

The voice and image of Karl Marlantes carries some of the burden of extending the Burns and Novick agenda of making war a romantic puzzle; his books – outside of the film's context – are far less political and more philosophical in tone. In both his book *What it is Like to Go to War* and the documentary film *The Vietnam War*, Marlantes offers a glimpse of a solution: recognizing that war is merely an extension of innate aggressive tendencies in the human species. He furthers this idea with an echo of historian Walter Hixson's thesis in *The Myth of American Diplomacy* (2008, Yale UP): that American national identity is based on a manly, hegemonic, and racially superior discourse where "War – like nothing else – forges the bonds of unity, loyalty, and patriotism [...] Wars, even unpopular wars, paved the way for the next wave of

pathological violence” (Hixson 2008, 14). Both Marlantes and Hixson recognize an inescapable violence in human nature, perpetuated by US national identity, but Marlantes sees the military and war experience as “finishing school” for that violent tendency; he suggests that by not recognizing a national level of “aggressive tendencies” the United States will end up in “wars, even unpopular wars”:

One of the things that I learned, in the war, is that we’re not the top species on the planet because we’re nice. We are a very aggressive species. It is in us. And, people talk a lot about how well the military turns you know, kids into you know, killing machines and stuff. And I’ll always argue that it’s just finishing school. What we do with civilization is that we learn to inhibit and rope in these aggressive tendencies, and we have to recognize them. I worry about a whole country that doesn’t recognize it. Cause if you think of how many times we get in scrapes as a nation, because we’re always the good guys. Sometimes I think if we thought that weren’t always the good guys we might actually get into less wars. (*The Vietnam War* 2017).

Marlantes essentially wants civilization – and especially the US – to wake up to its inner violent nature. His insistence that “aggressive tendencies” be “recognized” serves as a cautionary tale of what Hixson thought of “unpopular wars.” Furthermore, Marlantes posits that the lack of recognition of aggression in the US to its blind faith in being “the good guys” – and how that belief gets the US into “many scrapes.” Marlantes argues that seeing ourselves as a naturally aggressive species and using it for good – instead of being obsessed with being “the good guy” – could mean “less wars” in the future. This snippet of Marlantes’ thoughts offers the film some hopeful redemption, even if they occur halfway through the documentary (Episode Five: *This is What We Do*); he isn’t espousing a simple “give peace a chance” message, but he is implying that there’s another way to be “the good guy” without going to war. It just means we’d have to admit that humanity is

inherently violent, a fact the United States is rarely willing to admit and a point that Burns and Novick want to make clear.

The Vietnam War's use of Karl Marlantes's voice and image is purposeful and smart; he is an excellent speaker and makes obtuse ideas approachable. He doesn't get overly emotional or ruffled, and his account for the the film of his return to the US, as well as subsequent public treatment he received as an active-duty officer, is equal parts shock, bitterness, and measured. He explains his experience with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) with calmness and simplicity at the end of the film. Marlantes cultivated a healthy distance and curiosity for his time in the service. Legend has it that it took Marlantes decades to finish *Matterhorn*; in the Burns-Novick documentary Marlantes' bio line states: "Karl Marlantes lives near Seattle and spent 30 years writing a novel about his war" (*The Vietnam War* 2017). The film doesn't mention this singular novel's title, nor does it mention *What it is Like to Go to War*, which also falls under the category of memoir. Marlantes still remains a veteran, because it is in this capacity that he best serves the film's underlying theme. He is one of the film's unsung heroes; the veterans in this film must be made into heroes, per the continued agenda of Burns and Novick, but in the case of *The Vietnam War* their heroism must exhibit at least a cursory nod in the direction of antiwar sentiment. Marlantes walks a fine balance between the good and bad elements of war in his books, lectures, and his interview for this film. His refusal of his Rhodes scholarship and his impassioned letter home revive the patriotic spirit all war stories need, but Marlantes's story comes with the caveat that he disagrees with the war he's about to enter. This juxtaposition continues to create a romantic, mythological place for the Vietnam War; the film could not reconcile the divisions of the

war because it could not breach the unavoidable trap of war – it is such a part of the human experience that it can't be “a mistake” or “a bad war.” Marlantes confirms that war is just war – a complex human act that has existed as far back as humanity can recall – but *The Vietnam War* insists that this war was special in that it was an ill-laid plan from the start, and uses the words of a respected, credible author and veteran to assert this claim, without regard for the sacred space war holds for him and others.

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