

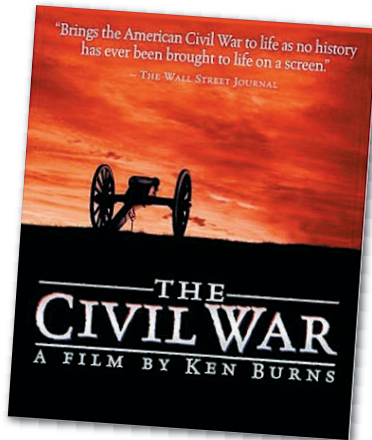
## Ken Burns: Communicating the Experience of War

**E**ighteen years after the premiere of his landmark documentary *The Civil War*, filmmaker Ken Burns is still moved by the Oliver Wendell Holmes quote that opened the series: "We have shared the incommunicable experience of war. We have felt, we still feel, the passion of life to its top....In our youths, our hearts were touched with fire."

It is not hyperbole to say that *The Civil War* was life-changing for countless people, fostering not just a greater awareness of history but also a thrilling sense that we could relate to the people who lived it.

In his most recent film, *The War*, Burns examined the experience of World War II through the lens of four emblematic American towns. He and his partners are now finishing a history of the national park system, and in the future they will turn their attention to another war, Vietnam, in addition to several other projects. Burns recently talked with *America's Civil War* about the film that many call his masterpiece, as well as his current work.

—Kim A. O'Connell



Looking back on it, how do you feel about your documentary *The Civil War*? Is there anything you would do differently today?

I'm very proud of that work. When we look back we've been amazed at how well it has aged. It speaks to a new generation of people. We like to think of ourselves as emotional archaeologists, getting to the heart of the matter. In nine episodes, you can't do everything. The point is: Did you capture the spirit of what was involved in the struggle? And I think that, 18 years ago, we did that. I do a lot of public speaking, and I don't think there's an event where someone doesn't say, "The reason I was a history major," or "the reason I got a Ph.D. was because I saw *The Civil War*."

The art of making a film is not only what is in the film, but what is left out. The cutting room floor is not filled with bad stuff, but with dozens of scenes that are good

but don't fit. We can't just sweep up the sculptor's rubble and make it into Part 22.

Your newest release is *The War*. How would you compare documenting the Civil War to World War II?

As much as I want to tell you they were night and day, they were remarkably similar. We were determined to not do another film about war, because it was too emotionally costly. But we were haunted by the truth of that Oliver Wendell Holmes quote...by that great paradox, that when someone's life is in great danger, that life is being lived at its top. That paradox informs why we are drawn to war. We wanted to do the bottom-up, intimate portrait of what it's like to be at war....

A hero has assets and strengths but also some obvious and inevitable weaknesses. It's

**Filmmaker Ken Burns has brought the Civil War to millions.**

ordinary people who remind us of the highest heroism. At that street level, at the battle level, and all among the privates, the same emotions come out. There may be different weaponry, different levels of warfare and different casualties, but when young boys are turned into professional killers, the same things happen and, dare I say, the same poetry issues from it. I saw it in the accumulated letters of the soldiers in the Civil War stories, but also in the raw testimony of World War II veterans. It can be boiled down to a set of declarative sentences: I was scared,

I was bored, I saw bad things, I did bad things, I lost good friends. The good wars, the just wars, and the unnecessary wars all share those things in common.

What is the greatest challenge in portraying the truth of war in a documentary format?

*The War* focuses entirely on so-called ordinary, geographically diverse towns. I spent years in those towns to select about 40-plus people to be in our film and then interwove their very personal stories with those stories that could be universal. Over the more than six years we

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worked on the film, it was a day-by-day, one-pant-leg-at-a-time process of how to narrate this intimate bottom-up collection of stories under the epic, overarching story of the war.

We faced the same challenges that we met in the *Civil War* series, as in how do you take this vast pot of dates, facts and lives and distill the essence of experience that is at once intimate but also general. It's incredibly difficult to do, and it represents an unbelievable banging of your head against the wall. You don't know where the dividing lines are, and it's not dissimilar to journalism. You can whittle a stick down and have nothing, or you can whittle it down to a beautiful ornate object. It's just a daily grind that in the end you hope will transcend into something universal.

You are now working on several upcoming documentaries. What keeps you going?

I believe that we are obligated to speak to higher emotional truths and to search our whole lives for it. It's the obligation of a life well lived, whether you produce something or not. When we say we want to be creative, what we mean is that we want the whole to be greater than the sum of its parts. We pay lip service to that, but we don't always understand the difference. It's the twinkle in our eye, the love in our hearts.



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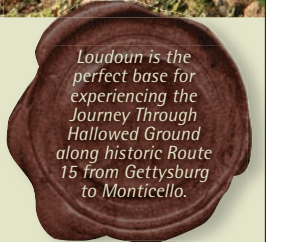


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