NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON WITH KEN BURNS, DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKER

SUBJECT:
"NO ORDINARY LIVES" - THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IN WORLD WAR II

MODERATOR: JERRY ZREMSKI, PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

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MR. ZREMSKI: (Sounds gavel.) Good afternoon, and welcome to the National Press Club. My name is Jerry Zremski and I'm the Washington bureau chief for the Buffalo News and president of the National Press Club.

I'd like to welcome our club members and their guests who are here today, as well as the audience that's watching us on C-SPAN. We're looking forward to today's speech, and afterwards I will ask as many questions from the audience as time permits. Please hold your applause during the speech so that we have as much time for questions as possible.

For our broadcast audience, I'd like to explain that if you hear applause, it may be from the guests and members of the general public

who attend our luncheons and not necessarily from the working press. (Laughter.)

I'd now like to introduce our head table guests and ask them to stand briefly when their names are called. From your right: Michael Freedman, vice president for communications at George Washington University; Tadayoshi Ii, Washington bureau chief for TV Asahi America; Catherine Cross, Washington television bureau chief for Bloomberg News; Aber Hartills, Washington bureau chief and senior correspondent for ZDF German Television; Sharon Rockefeller, president and CEO of WETA and a guest of the speaker; Gil Klein, national correspondent for Media General News Service and a former president of the National Press Club; Patricia Harrison, president and CEO of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and a guest of the speaker. Skipping over the podium, Angela Greiling Keane of Bloomberg News, the chair of the National Press Club Speakers Committee.

Skipping over our guest for a second, Andrew Schneider, associate editor of Kiplinger Washington Editors and the Speakers Committee member who organized today's lunch; Lynn Novik, co-director and co-producer of "The War;" Richard Salmon, senior associate editor at Kiplinger Washington Editors and past president of the National Press Club; Paula Kerger, president and CEO of PBS, and a guest of the speaker; Susan Sherwood (sp), president of the ILAN (ph) Media LLC; columnist John Sales of The Washington Times; and Joe Davis, director of public affairs for the Washington office of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. (Applause.)

Our speaker today redefined an entire art form. Ken Burns' work in bringing the American experience alive through voices and images has been so striking that his name has become synonymous with excellence in documentary filmmaking. A native of Brooklyn, Ken Burns made his first documentary film as a high school project using a camera his father bought him. He studied film at Hampshire College, originally hoping to follow in the footsteps of one of his favorite directors, the legendary John Ford. Surprisingly, he only took one history class at Hampshire College. (Laughs.)

After college, he and two colleagues moved to New York City and formed their own film production company. His first full-length product, completed in 1981, was a 60-minute documentary chronicling the construction of the world's first steel-wire suspension bridge. That film, "Brooklyn Bridge," earned him the first of two Academy Award nominations. Its television debut on PBS the next year marked the start of a working relationship that has lasted a quarter-century, and it is now set to last for years to come.

Over the course of the past 25 years, Burns has led viewers on an extraordinary journey through the triumphs and tragedies of American history. His work has covered the grand sweep of such events as the westward march of the frontier. He has explored the transformation of American life and values through the lenses of sports and music. And most famously, his 11-hour documentary "The Civil War" drew an

audience of 40 million viewers over its initial five-day run in September 1990. For his work, he has earned three Emmy Awards and a host of other honors.

Today, he joins us on the eve of his latest release. His seven-part documentary on the Second World War, simply titled "The War," will debut this Sunday on PBS. While highly anticipated, "The War" also was roundly criticized even before it aired. Hispanics complained that their contribution to the war effort was left out of the film and, in response, Burns added additional segments to the project. Now, though, the nation is anxiously awaiting to see a story that it knows well -- the story that shaped a generation -- retold by one of the great storytellers of this generation.

Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in welcoming Ken Burns back to the National Press Club. (Applause.)

MR. BURNS: Thank you very much. Good afternoon.

On behalf of Lynn Novik, the co-director and co-producer of our series, someone who deserves at least equal credit for this film, I want to thank the National Press Club for this opportunity to speak with you today. Both Lynn and I come today mindful that every production we undertake represents, indeed celebrates, the necessary collaboration with many hardworking individuals and conscientious institutions. We are grateful for our principal partners: WETA-TV and its chief executive and my dear friend Sharon Rockefeller; PBS, the best network on earth, and its wonderful president, Paula Kerger

--(applause) -- and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, led ably and vigorously by Pat Harrison. These three women have literally created the environment in which Lynn and I have been able to practice our craft these many years. Our underwriters -- Bank of America, Budweiser, and General Motors, along with the Eli Lily Foundation, the Arthur Vining Davis Foundation, the Pew Charitable Trust, the Park Foundation, the Longaberger Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Humanities, all generously permitted us to explore our vision of how to tell this important story, and we are so grateful -- fully aware of the enormous trust and faith they showed in our vision and approach.

Two other individuals deserve special attention -- this series would never have been made without the superb talents and remarkable energies of our producer, Sarah Bodstein, who is here today; and Geoffery C. Ward, the writer of this film, a gifted historian and wise counselor, who has helped us negotiate for more than 25 years the sometimes difficult waters of our always complicated task.

As World War II drew to a close in the spring of 1945, the CBS radio correspondent, Eric Sevareid, was troubled. He'd been reporting on the fighting for four years, had witnessed the fall of France, parachuted into the Burmese jungle, struggled to keep up with GIs as they battled their way toward Rome and then across southern France. And he had done his best to convey to his listeners back home all that

he saw and heard along the way. But he was haunted by the sense that he had failed. "Only the soldier really lives the war," he told his audience; "the journalist does not. He may share the soldier's outward life and dangers, but he cannot share his inner life because the same moral compulsion does not bear upon him. The observer knows he has alternatives of action; the soldier knows he has none. War happens inside a man," he went on, "and that is why, in a certain sense, you and your sons from the war will be forever strangers. But if by the miracle of art and genius in later years two or three among them can open their hearts and the right words come, then perhaps we shall know a little of what it was like, and we shall know then that all the present speakers and writers hardly touch the story."

Our film was created in the spirit and hope that we could, if only for a few moments, permit our fathers and our grandfathers to return to us no longer strangers; their inner storms calmed, if only for a second, by sharing their most honest recollections of war, the great lie of our civilization.

As a nation, we search our past continually for heroes, mentors and guides, and trust in their example to lead us through the most difficult of times. So many different things threaten the fragile coalition, the invisible and sometimes unspoken compact that binds us all together, that the resources of the present seem inadequate to our needs and we turn to those distinct figures to help us comprehend the whole.

Nowhere is the need for this advice greater, or the stakes higher, than when our country is facing the daunting specter of war. Whether it is the revolution that made us, or the devastating internal struggles of the Civil War, or the current actions in the Middle East, war sets our republic vibrating in often dangerous and unexpected and unintended ways. And we seek desperately to understand the mysterious, inscrutable, sometimes even transcendent elements that force their way to the surface when human beings kill each other in great numbers; that is to say, when human beings go to war.

It is not enough to be against war in a world where so much evil exists, where human nature itself propels people into defensive postures and then aggressive action. There is no chance that wars

will simply disappear just because we hope it will be so. Indeed, our history shows us that some wars had to be fought. And still the contradictions and paradox of armed conflict confound us at every turn.

This film was born out of great reluctance. Seventeen years ago, to the moment, we released an eleven-and-a-half-hour, nine-part film on the American Civil War. For years those of us who were engaged with that project struggled daily to understand the four horrible years in our national life where in order to become one, we tore ourselves in two.

Our series on the Civil War began with a quote from Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. He had been wounded six times during that conflict, and would go on to serve his country once more as a Supreme Court Justice. He said, "We have shared the incommunicable experience of war. We have felt -- we still feel -- the passion of life at its top. In our youths, our hearts were touched with fire." Holmes was struggling to put into words what every soldier who had faced combat knows in his or her gut: that paradoxically, when your life is most threatened, when violent death is possible at any moment, everything is vivified, the intensity of experience heightened to a level not felt in ordinary life. War creates a terror -- an excruciating,

unbearable terror -- that is not only tragic and repellant, but undeniably compelling, and sometimes -- inexplicably -- for some, attractive.

It is an almost indescribable feeling that survivors of war from the beginning of recorded human history have found overwhelming, intimidating, haunting; yet also seductive and spellbinding. Shortly after Appomattox, Walt Whitman, a Brooklyn journalist and sometimes poet who had worked as a nurse in the appalling Union hospitals, warned posterity of what he had just seen. "Future years," he said, "will never know the seething hell, the black infernal background, the countless minor seams and interiors of the secession war, and it is best they should not. The real war," Whitman said, "will never get in the books."

Whitman's admonition has not kept novelists and writers, historians, and even documentary filmmakers from trying, of course. But for years after our Civil War series was aired, we vowed that we would not attempt another film about the subject. At nearly every juncture we politely turned away the suggestions of strangers and colleagues that we take on this struggle or that one -- usually the Second World War -- each protest cementing even more our resolve not to go to war again. At first we didn't want to be typecast or seem to be exploiting the unexpected success of our Civil War film, but somewhere we also didn't want to descend again into the frightening, but of course, also mesmerizing parallel universe of war with its inevitable suffering, loss, catastrophe and death.

But several years ago, two equally awful yet different statistics began to erode that conviction for us. After years of deflecting requests that we do something specifically on World War II, usually from aging participants or their children anxious that their parents' long-private dramas be finally shared, we learned, to our horror, that 1,000 veterans of the second World War are dying each day in America; that we are losing, among our fathers and our grandfathers, a direct connection to the deeds of that unusually and admirably reticent generation; that if we, the inheritors of the world they struggled so hard to create for us, neglected to hear them out before they passed away, we would be guilty of a historical amnesia too irresponsible to countenance.

In recent years, to be sure, there has been an increase in our

popular culture in everything World War II that might have excused us. These have ranged from the ridiculous, of course, but also to the sublime, as in the superbly realized television drama "Band of Brothers," and of course, Stephen Spielberg's "Saving Private Ryan" with its extraordinary scene of the landing at Omaha Beach. And then there have been the books, each attempting to revisit, rearrange and reinterpret the specific moments or grand themes of the Second World War. One of them, Tom Brokaw's "Greatest Generation," became a phenomenon. It was, as if suddenly, that nearly lifelong reticence dissolved and brave soldier after brave soldier, liberated by the loose and essentially disconnected collection of stories in Brokaw's

book, finally felt they had been given permission to speak; to tell their stories before they were gone, their collective intimation of mortality -- a reminder that that incommunicable experience of war, as Holmes put it, nonetheless still required them to try to express to those future years, as Whitman said, what had really happened to them when they were teenagers -- what they themselves had seen and done, and how their individual stories connected to the larger issues and drama of that war.

Posterity, in a sense, beckoned. They had -- have -- to tell us. Their memory is their most valid asset and our greatest inheritance.

Brokaw should be given a medal for helping to release this extraordinary energy, this outpouring of pure personal history -- allowing us to understand without artifice or false pieties the real truth of war; that despite the leadership -- or, often, the lack thereof -- of politicians and generals, it is the bottom up story of so called ordinary soldiers that can fill in the fuller canvas for us.

We also noted that with the exception of a few excelling film efforts about specific battles or moments in that conflict, there had been no meaningful large-scale documentary film series on the Second World War for more than two generations. The knowledge that our fathers were dying now gave us further pause to reconsider our stance, our insistence on avoiding the messy chaos of war.

The second statistic was just as devastating as the first. It came from research done by the National Counsel for History Education in the mid 1990s. Among a number of demoralizing facts about the continuing crisis in our schools over what our children know and don't know, one item stood out to us. In the end, we could not ignore its stupefying truth or the consequences it infers for our still fragile republic.

It seems that an unacceptably large number of graduating high school seniors -- those with diplomas in hand, walking away from the podium, headed out into the real world to inherent, eventually, the responsibilities for leadership over the rest of us -- too many think we fought with the Germans against the Russians in the Second World War. I'm glad you're all sitting down. (Laughter.) My own knees tend to buckle a bit when I repeat a statistic I've known like a dark family secret for more than a decade. By the time these terrible statistics had fully sunk in we found that we could no longer ignore the Second World War.

Six years ago, therefore, we committed to working on a film series about World War II, a massive and emotionally challenging project that has consumed and transformed everyone who has worked on it. The journey from the original outrage at those two awful facts that we are losing our soldiers and losing our historical compass has been long and complicated. Taking on any war is risky, but taking on the biggest of them all is fraught with peril. Clearly, no film or companion book, however long, can reflect the whole story.

So how would we limit it, then, while still providing the combination of intimacy and context often lacking in recent works?

How do you relate the reality of that war? What was it really like? -- our central question. Which battles do you have to cover? How do you do justice to the small moments, the quotidian details of ordinary happenstance, without sacrificing the larger sense and momentum of the struggle? How do you communicate the simultaneity of the two major theaters, European and Pacific, that Americans -- we Americans -- were principally engaged in? How do you show the home front, from the radical and impressive transformation of American industrial might in a country just emerging from the Great Depression to the myriad personal moments of loss, worry, hope and reunion? How do you show the larger aerial view of the war, the top-down version, alongside the bottom-up individual side we always try to champion, or at least pay lip service to? Where do you start? These were only a handful of the questions we asked ourselves as we began work -- so long ago, it now seems.

To try to answer those questions, we have traveled nearly around the world, conducted dozens of interviews, drawn on material from hundreds and hundreds of archives, devoted thousands of man- and woman-hours to research and the organization of that material we collected, edited that material for more than two-and-a-half years, wrote and rewrote and wrote again hundreds of pages of narration, engaged the services of Keith David to read that narration, plus Tom Hanks, Samuel L. Jackson, Josh Lucas, Bobby Cannavale, Eli Wallach, Adam Arkin, Kevin Conway, among others, to read the diaries and letters, newspaper columns and other first-person material that inevitably punctuate our films. Worked with dozens of -- worked with a dozen talented musicians and one very great composer, Wynton Marsalis, to compliment the dozens of pieces of swing, jazz, classical, folk and other music from the period that form our soundtrack.

We're moved to our souls by the words and melody of Gene Shear's haunting American Anthem, which became one of our main musical themes, its lyrics sung at the end of episodes by Nora Jones. Collected the thousands of individual sounds of war to merge into an effects track that will hopefully put the viewer of the film uncomfortably into some of the battles we tried to bring to the fore.

And been privileged -- privileged -- to be ushered into the lives and memories of nearly 50 men and women who brought the war modestly, gingerly, with great emotion and pain and no small amount of (ambivalence ?), to our doorsteps so that we in turn might try to work and rework, massage and cajole, honor and celebrate the bravery and

heroism of these citizen-soldiers who, when they were 18, 19 and 20 years old, a time when most of us here had the luxury of inattention and narcissistic self-involvement, happened to have helped save the world.

How fortunate it is that we in the United States are stitched together as a people -- indeed, as individuals -- by words and their dangerous progeny, ideas, but also by memory. And when, as it lawfully sometimes must, our magnificent tapestry becomes frayed and worn, we often lose that connection to each other -- that which binds us back to the whole. In those moments, we look uneasily into the void that has over the centuries destroyed so many other promising experiments. In those moments, it becomes necessary to reinvigorate that which we share in common, ignoring those polarizing impulses that inevitably afflict us all.

One antidote to this misery of misunderstanding and division is memory. One antidote, in a sense, is anecdote. Memories that deeply

personal affirmation of self, that which calibrates and triangulates our sense of who we are. And yet it is also the ambassador of our own individual foreign policy, the agency that cements friendships, associations and ambitions. In a larger sense, memory permits us to have an authentic relationship to our national narrative. These individual stories and moments, anecdotes and memories become the building blocks, the DNA of our collective experience. Out of these associations we find the material, the glue to make our fragile experiments stick -- permanent -- a machine, someone once said, that will go of itself.

Watching the film, you will meet 50 or so human beings who are forced to descend into the madness of global war, all of whom you will know by the end of the last episode almost like family members. They will not be the traditional top-down heroes we are usually presented with -- the generals, presidents and statesmen, prime ministers and field marshals who tend to recede from our understanding just as they ascend to the pantheon of Great Men -- capital G, capital M. No, these are folks you might have just had Thanksgiving with; men whose stories of war are just now being told. We could not have done this film 10 years ago, and in five years it will be almost an actuarial impossibility.

And I'm so happy to say that today we are honored with the presence of Joseph Vaghi, who landed on Omaha Beach on June 6th, 1944, and gave of his time, his memories and his recollections of that extraordinary day. And I'm so happy to be with him today. (Extended applause.)

Most of the people who narrate our account of the most complex conflict in history come not from the centers of population and power in the United States, but from four geographically distributed -- to some extent, isolated -- towns: Laverne, Minnesota; Sacramento, California; Waterbury, Connecticut; and Mobile, Alabama. Where our civil war narrative had focused primarily on the main players while

trying not to sacrifice an appreciation of what the privates were doing, this story is different -- told almost exclusively from the perspective of those who did the actual fighting and dying, as well as those back home who waited for their loved ones to return. In short, if you weren't in combat on the front lines or waiting anxiously for somebody to come back, you're not in our film. Through their eyes, it is possible in moments to sense how the whole country got caught up in that war. These towns could be any four towns, of course. These 50 people could be any 50 people.

Of course we are looking for a universal human dimension of their experience. How the nation reacted to the news of the attack, how their sons were mobilized and sent off, how the progress of that war unfolded, what battles were like from the ground up -- at street level; how those who remained at home worked and worried and grieved in the face of the struggle; how innocent young men who had been turned into professional killers adjusted to a world without war; and how the four towns -- and most important, its people -- were permanently transformed by the Second World War. By concentrating on the specific, we hope we've made it possible to better receive the universal, to comprehend the whole because we are invested -- deeply and emotionally invested -- in the particular.

Over the course of the seven episodes of the film, these brave individuals will take us on a tour of hell. Not the good war of our sentimental imagination, but the necessary war that gives our first chapter its title.

Before the Japanese attacked on December 7, 1941 most Americans could not have found Pearl Harbor on a map. In the nearly four years

that followed, they would have to learn a host of new names of the places their sons would be fighting -- Kasserine Pass and Monte Cassino, Utah Beach, and Omaha Beach and Sant Maragles (ph), Arnhem and Aachen and the Huertgen Forest, and the Ardennes. And on the other side of the world, Guam and Bataan and Guadalcanal, Saipan and Peleliu and Iwo Jima, Midway, New Glousester and Okinawa, and more, and more.

And young men from our towns would learn difficult, painful lessons in those places, lessons as old as war itself -- the generals make plans, plans go wrong, and soldiers die.

Memory is imperfect, but its inherent instability that allows our past, which we usually see as fixed, to remain as it actually is: malleable, changing not just as new information emerges but as our own interests, emotions and inclinations change. In less than a generation, we can go from an almost obsessive interest in the guns and tactics of World War II to a profound apprehension of cause, heroism, loss, and even redemption. If history is accumulated memory, then war is a kind of forgetting, the worst kind of inattention to the flaws in our nature that repeatedly and foolishly propel us again and again and again into holocaust, magnifying and accelerating that loss, but also uniting us as a people in that grief.

The healing, if any, that can come from this at both a collective as well as individual level, is sponsored by the corrective -- that cathartic memory and its authentic expression always is.

So what did we find out? Many, many things, of course -- as old, perhaps, as war itself. It was clear that the Second World War, so distant to many of us now, reverberates and echoes down that cliched corridors of history, its lessons as fresh today in our own difficult situation as they were for the soldiers who struggled daily just to survive that horrible event. In the end, we came to believe in the presence of the young men whose stories we followed, that we did have one overarching theme we could not ignore. It is a truth, we think, as old as history itself, but one we always forget, especially in a society like ours, so addicted as we are now to the breathless embrace of spurious celebrity, to the great tyranny those synthetic heroes have over the rest of us. It is a truth this nostalgia and the mindless inattention that issues from it doesn't want us to know -- doesn't want us to wake up to.

It is, however, the theme that issues out of every frame of our film, I think -- not so much from our own doing as simply from bearing witness to the stories of these remarkably brave young men. It is also an idea inherent in our country's great and often deferred and forgotten promise, and that is there are no ordinary lives. By stepping into memory, what these men and women have given us -- by stepping us into the great gift of memory, we liberate ourselves.

Let me conclude by returning to an idea I have echoed in this place many times before. Most of us here, whether we know it or not, are in the business of words, and we hope with some reasonable expectation that those words will last. But alas, especially today those words often evaporate, their precision blunted by neglect, their insight diminished by the sheer volume of their ever-increasing brethren, their force diluted by ancient animosities that seem to set each group against the other. The historian -- the late historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. said that "we suffer today from too much pluribus and not enough unum." He's right. He's right. Few things survive in these cynical days to remind us of the union from which so many of our personal as well as collective blessings flow. And it is hard not to wonder, in an age when the present moment consumes and overshadows all else -- our bright past and our dim, unknown future -- what finally does endure; what encodes and stores the genetic material

of our civilization, passing down to the next generation the best of us, what we hope will mutate into betterness for our children and our posterity.

Ladies and gentlemen, history holds one answer. Nothing in our daily life offers more of the comfort of continuity, the generational connection of belonging to a vast and still-complicated American family, a powerful sense of home, the spiritual and well as material benefit of shared sacrifice, the freedom from time's constraints, and the great gift of the accumulated memory, than as an active and heartfelt engagement with our collective past.

Thank you for your attention. In order to answer the questions, I am compelled to ask my partner in everything in this production, Lynn Novick, to join me at the podium to help in trying to answer you.
Thank you so much. (Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Thank you very much, Ken.

Our first question is for you. What did you know of your father's experience in the war? And did you know enough to have it influence you in the film?

MR. BURNS: I was born in 1953. The Second World War was so present in our lives.

My father served in the United States Army in the European Theatre. He arrived, I'm very happy to say, in Europe in the late spring of 1945, as the war was winding down. He was part of the occupation. My brother and I were very aware of the various trophies of his liberating activities. He actually occupied Krupp's house for a while, and this 19-year-old was sitting on one of the greatest wine cellars in Europe -- (laughter) -- and had the presence of mind to soak the labels off all the bottles he and his fellow liberators enjoyed each evening. And when he passed away in 2001, leaving my brother and me with too many unanswered and unasked questions, he had the presence of mind to put it into a little binder, and we discovered this wonderful, unspoken set of wine labels that were his experience in Europe -- (laughter) -- and we were able to work him in a couple times into the film just as an image of an incredibly optimistic and perhaps even naive lieutenant heading off to Europe unaware of what was going on.

MR. ZREMSKI: In the Civil War film, you gave voice to all sides. Do you give voice to all sides in this piece, including civilians?

LYNN NOVICK (co-producer, "The War"): We really decided that we could bite off more than we could possibly chew, and so we decided to focus really only on the American perspective. And it was painful sometimes because we knew it would be so interesting to know what was that Japanese soldier thinking or what was the mother in Tokyo thinking when the planes came over, but we decided that that was just going to complicate our project too much, and we could just deal with what we knew and what we would try to understand. And so we focused exclusively on the American point of view. It is myopic in a way.

What we've found is that, when we've shown the film overseas -- and we were recently at a film festival in France, in the spring at the Cannes Film Festival, where they showed the whole film -- we showed it and we were worried that people there might feel it's too American. And every person that we met from all over Europe came to us and said, "It's so interesting and it's so universal. It tells us what the war was like for everybody, and we think they should make a film just like this about our country's experience." So we hope we have, you know, done the right thing in that regard.

MR. ZREMSKI: Ken, you've been quoted as saying that many World War II histories are, quote, "distracted by an unnecessary and unnatural interest in celebrity generals and politicians, and an unnatural obsession with armaments and weaponry." Why do you think that is? And how does it distort the history?

MR. BURNS: It's even worse than that. (Laughs, laughter.) It's not just celebrity generals and politicians and this classic American obsession with guns and armaments and weaponry; it's also strategy and tactic intervenes between what went on. We also get fascinated -- quite understandably -- with evil, and in this case, in the presence of the Nazis, we have such a wonderful evil target to go at.

But this often metastasizes into a kind of almost admiration for their early military successes and their superior weaponry. All of this is an attempt to abolish what is the truth of war -- that it is horrible, that soldiers from the beginning of time have an equally compelling experience which can be sort of distilled into a few declarative sentences: "I was scared." "I was bored." "I was hot." "I was cold." "I don't think my officers knew what they were doing." "They didn't give me the right equipment." "I saw bad things." "I did bad things." "I lost good friends." And all of that other stuff is our nervous disinterest in finding out actually what happens in war, which is lots of human beings get killed.

And so we maintain our attraction -- we can't help but be drawn to these incredibly existential moments of battle -- and yet, we would prefer to put in the middle, oh, the famous guy who, by the way, was nowhere near the action, or the politician who wasn't even in the theater, or the strategy and the tactics that reduce human life to arrows and lines on a map, or the guns that did the damage but for the technological force, or the Nazis who in the end were just the enemy. We were interested in a more personal story, and that's what we tried to tell in this. And I hope not too much of that other junk gets in the way.

MR. ZREMSKI: How different would World War II have been if we had today's media back then?

MS. NOVICK: Oh, I get to do that one. (Laughter.) Oy!

Well, we think about that all the time in making the film because we were very aware, and we tried to make that part of the story that we told.

And what we tried to do was unite the perspective of the home front with people who were in combat, and the way we did that was through the media at the time. So you'd see newsreels, you'll hear the radio broadcasts, you'll see the newspapers, and you'll understand that the news is very carefully controlled. And so, in fact, it's usually a very optimistic portrayal of what is going on. No matter how bad the news might be, it's really not getting across.

And yet, over the course of the war, the government became concerned that the public was too complacent and didn't care enough and wasn't angry enough at the enemy, and was maybe was going to just "ah, it's not worth fighting anymore." And so about halfway -- well, in the fall of '43 -- I do not know if that's exactly halfway, but -- our government decided that the American public needed to know more about what the war was really like, and allowed the media to publish photographs first in the fall, in September, and then footage of dead Americans who had been killed in battle, and the way of really bringing the war home, because it had been fairly abstract and sort of this overly victorious portrayal. And it didn't have exactly the affect that the government had hoped. They were hoping that it would sort of spur enlistment -- and, as you can imagine, didn't.

(Laughter.) So, of course, enlistment went down, but bond sales went up. And it made people very angry at home that these bad people were killing our boys.

So there was certainly a manipulation and control of the media which is much more difficult -- I guess you could say it is more difficult for our government, but maybe not, because we cannot see the coffins of the soldiers who have been killed in Iraq. So in a way, maybe the media today, or the government -- the War Department, the Pentagon -- is more controlling of what information the public has. I don't know. It's a really interesting question and I think we will all be pondering it for a long time to come.

MR. ZREMSKI: Can you talk about the difference between producing "The Civil War," where all the veterans were dead, and "The War," where you still had so many survivors to interview?

MR. BURNS: You know, we'd like to see ourselves as emotional archaeologists uninterested in excavating dry dates and facts and events of the past, and more curious about the sort of larger issues that propel us into certain situations. And it is true that our attempt in the Second World War was to bring alive that war, and we, of necessity, had to use the diaries and the journals, the letters,

the commentary of historians, and it affected us deeply, so much so, as you heard, that we were reluctant to take on the war again.

The Civil War soldiers, when they'd been in combat, said they'd "seen the elephant." That was the phrase, that once you had been in combat, this spectacularly other thing that Mr. Vaghi knows, you -- in the Civil War, you had "seen the elephant," the most exotic other. And we felt, in some pale shadow of that, we too had experienced a little bit of the horrors and thought we wouldn't get back there again. We were propelled to this project. And I think the real blessing is -- for us was not doing from the top down; not spending the time with the Lincoln -- in this case FDR -- not spending the time with the generals, not Grant -- in this case the Eisenhowers -- but by choosing these so-called ordinary people who were alive, who became as close to us as I hope they will become in the next days and weeks to you, like family members.

I did not do the interview with Mr. Vaghi. I met him just a few minutes ago. Lynn did the spectacular interview. And yet I have been with him -- he has, more important, been with me -- for the last five years, and he now is part of my life. And I think the great blessing of working on this film -- the huge difference, to finally answer your question -- is that they are very much alive, and that is what the whole purpose of it was: to bear witness to the testimony while they were able to remember and to share with us.

MR. ZREMSKI: Did you see much difference between the World War II soldier and the Civil War soldier?

MR. BURNS: No, I think, we've covered that. The Civil War soldier was permitted to keep journals and letter and diaries, and so we have a voluminous record of that. It was the policy in the Second World War for soldiers not to betray any information about where they were in their letters or what they were doing, or to keep journals or diaries. The handful that survive benefit from the fact that guys were surreptitiously keeping notes -- one of our fellows on the pages of a New Testament, certain that his CO would never check his Bible. (Laughter.) And so we have benefited from their commentary. It's a quite different thing.

But I think, as I said before, the circumstances are different; the enemies are different; the landscape is different; the weaponry

is, of course, different; but the result, the consequence and those experiences that soldiers have remain the same. And I promise you if we were to import someone from the Iraq War, or even through some strange magic be able to bring someone from an ancient Peloponnesian War, they would all say the exact same things, and it was that that we were after.

I don't need to tell you that you do not have the handholds and the scaffolding and the anchors to permit you to understand the overarching story of the Second World War; it is there. And, in fact, strangely enough, as I suggested, I think it might be better because

you are fully aware of so-called ordinary people. When you land at Omaha Beach, that arrow there is Joe Vaghi. You know what his mother said to him in Italian as he left. He told us in Italian what she said to him. We know where he lives. We know what his brothers look like. We feel his life.

And so, ironically, it was Josef Stalin who said that "when one person dies it's a tragedy; when a million die, it's a statistic." It was our intention to try to remove the sense of statistic from the nearly 60 million people who died in this conflict and try to bring it down to a human level in which we realize that every one of those numbers had a mother who was speaking in Italian to them before they went off to the greatest invasion in history.

MS. NOVICK: Do I have time to say just one thing briefly?

MR. ZREMSKI: Sure.

MS. NOVICK: I just -- I mean, the thing that we were worried about in going into this film was that, if we were to ever think about "The Civil War" and try to do anything like that it was terrifying anyway, but that the soldiers back then were so eloquent -- the diaries, the letters, just the way they used the English language and the way they described their experiences and their sense of purpose and all of that was just extraordinary. And so, would we find, you know, equivalence in today? And we were so humbled and privileged to find people in a totally different medium -- in speaking usually, as opposed to writing -- and with the way that we talk today, which is much less formal than the 19th century -- to find the eloquence of people describing their experiences in utterly different kinds of language was really-- we were sort of bowled over by the gift of the people that we interviewed and their way with words in telling us what they went through.

MR. ZREMSKI: In your opinion, how is our nation at war today different from our nation at war in 1942?

MR. BURNS: As we say early in the film, the Second World War touched every family on every street in every town in America. Today, we have a separate military class that suffers its losses apart and alone from most of us in this room. We had at the time of the Second World War a sense of shared sacrifice, where we made ourselves materially as well as spiritually richer. Today, we are all independent free agents; we listen to the radio alone, we drive in our cars alone, we surf the Net alone, we watch TV alone. And we are unwilling to give up anything in the face of what we are told is a threat to our civilization.

At 9/11 we were asked to do nothing. We were asked to go shopping, in fact. In the Second World War, on the heels of the greatest economic dislocation in the history of the world, Americans were again asked to give up, and give up, and give up again, and again, and again. And strangely enough, we felt a richness, a sense

of community and participation. We were connected to our soldiers in every way.

Today we give up nothing. We remain richer and richer, but so poor. We experience that poverty of spirit from not doing that. And so I think we are -- we don't know what is going on. We don't see the caskets. In order to find out the gory details, which we've tried to share with you judiciously and without gratuitousness, we have to surf the Net almost like pornographers finding this stuff. We are a democratic people unengaged in a war that requires a democratic participation.

(Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Is there anything that you learned during the film that disappointed you about the American effort during World War II?

MS. NOVICK: I started from such a low threshold in terms of knowing a lot about the war that I learned -- everything that's in the film was new to me, basically, so that's kind of a hard question. But I think the thing that for me really haunts me and is the most disappointing about our country is that we were not really a democratic society at that time, fully, and that we had segregated military and the internment of Japanese-Americans and prejudice and discrimination against many other groups. And we were fighting for freedom and democracy.

And I think for most Americans who were not affected by that or who didn't realize they were -- you know, people who weren't the victims of those policies and laws really didn't think about it that much, and it really got sort of pushed to the side for a lot of people.

And that's very painful when you see the photographs of the internment camps, when you see the all-black units and you see some of the documentation of why this was done. And it's just heartbreaking, really, and it's a huge stain, I think, on our society that we need to never forget. So it's easy to sort of think about this great heroic effort, which it was. And then there's this other part of it that is very important not to forget.

MR. BURNS: Can I add to that too?

MR. ZREMSKI: Sure.

MR. BURNS: You know, we've tried to get involved in a true, honest, complicated past that's drawn to the controversy and tragedy, because we think it sets in relief that much greater the proud accomplishments and the many proud accomplishments of our country. But Linda's absolutely right. When you think about the treatment of Japanese-Americans, for example, unlike German-Americans or Italian-Americans, also part of the Axis, who were not interned, their livelihoods, their farms, their families, their jobs uprooted and sent away -- one week's notice, as much as you could carry in one suitcase -- American citizens taken away, classified; the young men classified as enemy aliens unfit for military service.

And then when the War Department, in the face of mounting casualties, reversed policy, they recruited these young men from the camps for specific front-line combat duty. And they performed so magnificently that they're one of the most decorated regiments in the entire European theater in the United States Army.

But there is an essential irony here, that when a son gives up his life for the country, the ultimate sacrifice which we in a democratic society venerate above all else, dying on the battlefield

in the cause, the death notice goes back to parents who are still under machine-gun guard in a camp miles from where they live, and "We regret to inform you that your son has made the ultimate sacrifice for his country. And, by the way, if you step two feet to the right, I'm going to have to shoot you."

There's a black market going on in the United States that belies a lot of that. And yet, out of that stuff, the negativity which we feel compelled to also say, is that sense of community that I think we can yearn for today. So it's all there, warts and all. But the fact of America at that time, I think, is still, on balance, very beautiful.

MR. ZREMSKI: Did Truman do the right thing in using nuclear weapons on Japan? (Laughter.)

MS. NOVICK: Oh, I guess -- okay. Oh, my. (Laughter.) That is not a question that we really feel fully qualified to answer definitively. We leave that to the historians. But what we did find, in speaking to the people who were there -- and granted, as I said before, we did not speak to anyone who was living in Japan at the time -- we had pretty much total unanimity that the people who were -- at the time people felt it was the right thing to do. And I think it's very dangerous to second-guess, from the vantage point of today, decisions that were made then with what we know now, if they had known, et cetera.

But the one thing that I learned going through this process was a sense of a continuum of a very gray area of bombing civilians and targeting civilians that began with the Germans with their first blitzkrieg and carried through Coventry and Rotterdam and on through Dresden and the fire bombing of Japan. And when you look at the total casualties, civilian deaths from World War II are vastly more than military casualties. And so by the time you get to the atomic bomb, it's sort of the end of a long, slow slide, if you will, into something that we would probably prefer not to think about.

So it's very difficult to isolate that one event out of context of what had been happening already. You know, I think it's just very important. And when you see the film -- and that's one thing we're very proud of -- it's that you will understand it in a different way than if you just focused on the bomb, which is sort of misleading.

And the other thing is that I know we talk a lot and I grew up a lot with the statistics of how many Americans would have lost their lives in the invasion of Japan, and that is sort of unknowable. There were lots of different estimates and statistics.

But what we don't often talk about is how many Japanese would have lost their lives in the invasion of Japan. And given the way that they had resisted in all the places that we had fought against them and the way that their government approached the unwillingness to surrender and wanting to mobilize everybody in the country, it's quite possible that casualties in Japan would have been exponentially more than were lost in the atomic bomb. So that's as far as we can go, I think.

MR. ZREMSKI: How do you explain the lack of ethnic diversity in the original version of the film? What happened?

MR. BURNS: (Laughs.) Well, I would quibble with that description. There is tremendous ethnic diversity in the film. We set about knowing that we could not do an encyclopedia, that we couldn't be the Manhattan phone book representing every single group, and went to these four towns -- chosen, more or less, arbitrarily -- advertised our presence, reached out to historical societies and

archives and veterans' groups and sought not specific ethnic groups but people with combat experience. And out of those groups came the many extremely diverse crowd that is in our film.

In the course of it, no Hispanics came forward. No (wax or waves ?) came forward. No Filipino-Americans came forward, a much larger minority group at that time; no submariners or other things. We don't get to tell every battle. We knew we would have to look for that universal human dimension.

And when we were made aware of some people's displeasure, we went out and filmed a couple of stories that are fantastic and added it to the end of a couple of our episodes; also went out and told a Native American story we've wanted to tell for about 20 years, which is wonderful, and added it to a third episode without violating in any way the artistic integrity of the work that we had completed a year and a half ago, I think have made people whole.

So not only is there even more diversity than was already there, but we have encouraged public television at the local level to produce films in the same manner, the same kind of template, as our series, reaching out and finding these arbitrary individual stories.

And I am very pleased to say that with the full force of PBS behind it and with the very generous support of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, there are more than 40 films made all around the country that are going to tell literally hundreds of more stories than what we've told. We've initiated, at a local level, more than 117 oral history projects that are reaching out even farther into the community.

And we ourselves, at a national level, have partnered with the Library of Congress's Veterans' History Project, and we are encouraging those kids, who may not know who we fought with, but all have DV cameras to download from us some simple lighting and shooting instructions, sample questions, and to go out and get Grandpa or Great-Grandpa, Grandma or Great-Grandma, Uncle Charlie, the guy down the street, and before you're in a position of regretting that you didn't ask those questions of them, that we begin to record them. And if you make a copy, a grateful republic will have it on repository at the Library of Congress forever. And we think this goes a long way.

We could not have told the story of the Second World War if we'd burdened ourselves by seeking every single group. We would have teetered and collapsed from our own weight. We are very proud of the effort we've made and of the amazing, remarkable people we've done. But we're equally as proud of all the other ancillary efforts that have reached out into every corner of this land and are telling stories that are being told for the first time.

MR. ZREMSKI: What has the controversy over Hispanics in the war taught you? And will it influence your future work?

MR. BURNS: It taught me that we are a complicated people, that maybe perhaps Arthur Schlesinger is right; there's too much pluribus and not enough unum. (Laughter.) It taught me that it's very important to judge something when you've seen it, not before you've seen it.

We began to see that we are continually engaged today in a dialectic, and it's red state, it's blue state, it's North-South, it's East-West, it's black-white, it's male-female, young and old. We spend our entire lives consumed with that which makes me different from you. And yet the purpose of art is to try to suggest ways in which we come together, the unum.

We felt it was incumbent upon us, in the face of this controversy -- which will not happen in other films -- it has to do with this signal importance of the Second World War not only in American history, but for the rising group of Hispanics whose fathers served their country, did not get the recognition they deserved. And we felt it was incumbent upon us to rise above, to take the high road and to tell these stories. So I think it's jut instructive in its singularity.

MR. ZREMSKI: Have you ever considered addressing a more contemporary topic like the Iraq war?

MR. BURNS: (Off mike.)

MS. NOVICK: Well, we're not historians. We're amateur historians. Hopefully we're just filmmakers, but we don't -- we'd like to have enough time go by so that we can have a little bit of perspective and have more time to process things that are happening. So something that's happening right now kind of is -- we feel is not our strongest suit, probably, to really delve deeply into something and find out three weeks later or a month later or two years later that actually what you thought was happening right now turned out to be completely different. And that happens all the time and that's what we count on all of you to tell us. And so we need a little bit more time.

I think the Iraq war would be a great subject, as would the Vietnam War -- and any war. War is inherently dramatic. I think we're all going to be always drawn to these stories since the time of Homer to find out what men do in war and what war does to men -- and women now. But we would like perhaps 10, 15 or 20 years to let the historians figure out what it all means and then we can try to make sense of it.

MR. ZREMSKI: Tell us about your next project.

MR. BURNS: Well, in typical OCD fashion we have several. (Laughter.)

We are finishing up a multipart history of our national parks. Not a travel log or what inn or lodge to stay at, but a kind of a story of the ideas and the individuals that created this uniquely American idea. The notion that land would be set aside for everybody for all time and not for the privileges of kings and noblemen. We're

beginning work, we hope, on an update of our baseball series. We hope to do something on prohibition. And Vietnam is not off the table -- we're not going to say no to war anymore.

And as many of you know, I have recently signed up with PBS until 2022. So I've got my hands full and lots of projects to do. And I can tell you that if I were give a -- (interrupted by applause) -- thank you. If I were given 1,000 years to live I would not run out of projects in American history. So I look forward to sharing them and working with Lynn and all the other remarkable people -- Sarah and PBS and CPB and WETA. And we're in it for the long haul.

MR. ZREMSKI: Okay. We're almost out of time, but we're not out of traditions here at the National Press Club. And as you know, one tradition is our plaque. And you probably have enough of these to have a National Press Club coffee klatch -- (laughter) -- but here is one more!

MR. BURNS: This makes six! Six -- actually, a complete set. Thank you.

MR. ZREMSKI: Okay.

Next let me just remind our members of our future speakers: On Friday, Cristian Samper, the acting secretary of the Smithsonian, will be here. September 26th, Pauline Frommer, creator of the New Pauline Frommer Guidebooks for adult budget travelers, will be here. And on the 28th, Congressman Steny Hoyer.

Lastly -- our last question -- since Cristian Samper is going to be here on Friday, you've criticized the Smithsonian's policy for restricting access to the archives of the Smithsonian. So is there anything you'd like us to talk to him about when he's here on Friday? (Laughter.)

MR. BURNS: I think they've cleaned their house pretty adequately from my view. I think there were many of us so mindful of the treasures in our attic that the notion that someone not of the American people, but of a corporation, would be able to be a gatekeeper of that attic -- selecting who might have access to it -- was anathema to the spirit of James Smithson. It's an anathema to the spirit of our country. And now that it's over we don't have to talk about it anymore. (Laughter, applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Thank you.

I'd like to thank you for coming today. I'd also like to thank National Press Club staff members Melinda Cooke, Pat Nelson, Jo Anne Booz and Howard Rothman for their work on today's luncheon. Also, thanks to the NPC library for its research.

The video archive of today's luncheon is provided by the National Press Club Broadcast Operations Center. Press Club members also can

access free transcripts of our luncheons at our website, www.press.org and nonmembers may purchase transcripts, audio and video tapes by calling 1-888-343-1940.

Thank you. We're adjourned. (Sounds gavel.)

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