

Apocalypse Then & Now

by

J. Austin Duke

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## Abstract

This project is a documentary film about changing perspectives in public opinion and public memory of the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War was an event that left a mark on American society and is seen by many as a turning point in American history. This project will examine how the Vietnam War is remembered by the American people, both those who were young when the war was happening and those who are only now studying it. The main content of this project comes from a series of interviews with veterans of the Vietnam War returning to Vietnam decades later and with modern-day college students who are studying the war through a study abroad program in Vietnam. This project will show how people's personal opinions on the war have changed over the years and how the entire American society's views on Vietnam have shifted across generations and will attempt to explain why these changes have occurred.

## Project Origins

I first began work on this film in the spring semester of 2015 when I decided to go to Vietnam with Dr. Frisby's study abroad course on the Vietnam War and the public memory. I saw this as an opportunity to make an interesting and unique creative/research project. I decided to put to use the video production skills I had acquired through my studies the College of Mass Communication and make a documentary film about changes in public perspectives on the Vietnam War. My model for making this film was the work of renowned video historian Ken Burns.

## Pre-Production

Once I decided on making the film, I began to plan the type of film I would make. I decided that the best way to make a film about changes in public perspective on a war that ended forty years ago would be to make an interview-focused documentary. This film would focus on the way individuals viewed the Vietnam War while it was happening and compare those to their views on the war now and how American society's views on the war have changed. I knew that on this trip I would be with other students as well as veterans of the Vietnam War.

I decided that I would interview the students and veterans while we were in Vietnam. Before we departed, I wrote a list of questions for these interviews. My original plan was to interview each subject before and after the trip. This ended up not being possible. The veterans all lived in other states, and the other students were still busy with class right up until the week before we left. I prepared a set of questions for the veterans (Appendix A) and the students (Appendix B).

To prepare for this project, I began to conduct research to understand better what information I would be covering. At this point, my research focused on major events of the war as well as important events in the United States in regards to the war, such as protests and government decisions on US policy in Vietnam. I also researched pop culture related to the Vietnam War in the years after the war, specifically movies about the Vietnam War.

## Production

On May 11, 2015, we left Nashville and flew west, first to Los Angeles and then on to Vietnam. As soon as we arrived in Vietnam, I began to record video and take photographs that could be used as B-roll in my film. B-roll is footage that has no dialog or principal performers in it. In the context of my film, B-roll is used to fill the space between interviews and to supplement the information revealed through interviews. To record video footage and photographs I used the Canon Rebel t5i DSLR.

I spent the first week getting to know the veterans in our group before I began the interviews. Because we were often in transit, the only chances I had to conduct these interviews were after dinner in the dining rooms and lobbies of the hotels we stayed in. These were not ideal locations because I could not control the environment and on many of the interview videos one can hear people in the background. These were also not very well lit locations. Because I had to travel overseas I could not take any lighting equipment with me and there was nowhere to rent lighting equipment. Because of this, I had to shoot at a high ISO. The ISO can best be described as the camera's sensitivity to light. The higher the ISO, the more sensitive to light the camera is and the more it can capture in dark environments. Unfortunately, shooting at a high ISO yields a grainy, low quality image.

When recording the interviews, I used a process called dual system audio. This means that the audio and video are recorded to separate devices. I continued to use my Canon camera to record video. For audio, I used a wireless lavalier microphone clipped

to the subject's collar. To record the audio, I used a Zoom H4N audio recorder. All interviews were recorded in stereo.

I was able to interview all the veterans on the trip, but I was unable to interview the students on the trip because of time constraints. Because of our conflicting schedules over the summer, I had to wait until September to interview the other students on the trip. I interviewed Nathan Abelt, Jonathan Essaf, and Sean Martin. I intended to interview Timothy Chitpanya, another student from our trip, but he did not respond to my e-mail.

After conducting all the interviews, I wrote a script for narration to tie the interviews together and discuss other important information not discussed in the interview (Appendix C). I recorded myself reading the narration with the Zoom recorder.

### Post-Production

I edited this footage in Adobe Premiere Elements 9 editing suite on my laptop. For additional B-roll I used military archival footage and historical newsreel footage on the Vietnam War. The military archival footage is in the public domain because any kind of recording made by a member of the US military in the course of their duty is in the public domain. The newsreel footage is not public domain and is property of CBS, but it is permissible for me to use it in this film under Fair Use because I am not using it for its artistic merit but rather I am commenting on it and critiquing it.

The music I used in this film is a collection of traditional Vietnamese folk music that is not copyrighted and is performed by the house band at a restaurant in Ho Chi Minh City. The music used in the film's ending credits is performed by the US Navy Band and US Army Band and is in the public domain.



After editing was complete, I published the video on a DVD. The final video is fifty eight minutes and thirty eight seconds long.

### Findings

My findings from doing this project were somewhat surprising. Originally, my perception of the Vietnam War were that most people in the US opposed it and that most of the men who fought there were draftees like my grandfather. Through my interviews and research, I found that most of the men who served in Vietnam volunteered for service and most people on the home front supported the war or were or just did not care about the war.<sup>1</sup> During his interview, Marine Corps veteran Doug Woods said that when he joined the Marines in the late 1960's, most people didn't care about the war as it was "old news."<sup>2</sup>

I also found that the anti-war movement was not a wide sweeping movement that encompassed the bulk of the population but was a small movement of a few people, mostly college students and other young people. In fact, it was the college students that started the anti-war movement; the first anti-war demonstrations of the Vietnam era occurred on college campuses.<sup>3</sup> Yale University played host to many groups that opposed the war, such as the May Second Movement and the Progressive Labor Party.<sup>4</sup> Eventually, the anti-war movement grew to include more than just college students and

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<sup>1</sup> Small, Melvin. *Antiwarriors: The Vietnam War and the Battle for America's Hearts and Minds*. Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 2002, 24.

<sup>2</sup> Woods, Doug. "Doug's Interview." Interview by author. May 20, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Hall, Mitchell K. *Vietnam War Era People and Perspectives*. Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2009, 67.

<sup>4</sup> Small, *Antiwarriors: The Vietnam War and the Battle for America's Hearts and Minds*, 13.

was even supported by well-known individuals such as Dr. Benjamin Spock and Jane Fonda joined the anti-war cause.<sup>5</sup>

What I found to be the main turning point in American opinion on the Vietnam War was the Tet Offensive. The Tet Offensive was a massive offensive by the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong that was launched against the major cities of South Vietnam on January 30, 1968.<sup>6</sup> The communist forces were initially successful as they had the element of surprise, but they were eventually defeated by the combined US and South Vietnamese Forces and the Viet Cong was effectively eliminated as a major threat.<sup>7</sup> Although the Tet Offensive could be seen as a military victory for the US forces and their allies, the general public was given a version of events that painted the battle's results in a negative light and made Tet seem like a defeat for the US military. This was thanks in part to journalists like Walter Cronkite who said that the war could not be won.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the growth of the anti-war movement, they remained only a small piece of American society. Only weeks after the Kent State protests, one-hundred thousand people in New York City marched in protest against the anti-war demonstrators.<sup>9</sup> This was an isolated incident and pro-war demonstrations were uncommon during the latter half of the war and in the end it was public apathy that ended American involvement in Vietnam.<sup>10</sup>

I found that in the years since the Vietnam War, most veterans still believe that they were doing the right thing in doing what their country asked them to do. Some now

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<sup>5</sup> Small, Small, *Antiwarriors: The Vietnam War and the Battle for America's Hearts and Minds*, 24,150.

<sup>6</sup> Schmitz, David F. *The Tet Offensive: Politics, War, and Public Opinion*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005, 83.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>9</sup> Hall, Mitchell K. *Vietnam War Era People and Perspectives*. 90.

<sup>10</sup> Karnow, Stanley. *Vietnam, a History*. 2nd Rev. and Updated ed. New York, New York: Penguin Books, 1997, 671.

believe that the US shouldn't have gotten involved in the war.<sup>11</sup> Others believe that we should have been there or that we at least had the right intentions in getting involved, but the way the war was conducted was improper.<sup>12</sup> These believe that it was the politicians who lost the war and not the soldiers. They hold fast to the idea that the US military was capable of defeating the communist forces in Vietnam and was in fact winning the war militarily, but the battle for public opinion was lost and the politicians gave into public pressure to end American involvement in Vietnam. All the veterans I interviewed expressed a sense of regret over the war, both for the fact that America was involved in someone else's civil war and the way the war was managed.

The modern generations of young people do not know much about the Vietnam War and for the most part only know what they see in the movies. They don't understand what the Vietnam War was about or what it really means to America today. As college student Nathan Abelt said in his interview, students in American schools learn that the Vietnam War happened and that there were some protesters, but they don't really learn what happened in the war.<sup>13</sup> Sean Martin expressed indignation at the very idea that the Vietnam War was even taught in schools, saying that there was so much about the war that most people never know.<sup>14</sup>

What many Americans know about the Vietnam War comes from movies. Jonathan Essaf said that the movies about Vietnam were some of the main sources of information he had about the war. These included, as he called them, "all the good ones:

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<sup>11</sup> McClure, Ed. "Ed's Interview." Interview by author. May 19, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Kraszuski, Joe. "Joe's Interview." Interview by author. May 23, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Abelt, Nathan. "Nathan's Interview." Interview by author. September 8, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Martin, Sean. "Sean's Interview." Interview by author. September 8, 2015.

Hamburger Hill, Rambo, Rambo, Forrest Gump.”<sup>15</sup> These films are well known in our society and mold the way we look back at the war, regardless of their historical accuracy. Veteran films like the Rambo series and *The Deer Hunter* attempted to show us what war could do to people and how traumatizing Vietnam was to the men who had to fight there.<sup>16</sup> Films like *Hamburger Hill* attempted to show combat in the most real way possible in a movie and show audiences what a nasty, bloody mess war could be.<sup>17</sup> These films created the idea of the Vietnam War for those who were not there and helped to define the way American society sees the war.<sup>18</sup>

Now, looking back, those who were in the Vietnam believe that we learned valuable lessons in the Vietnam War. They believe that we learned about fighting insurgencies like the Viet Cong and that we learned how detrimental it could be when the media turns against the war. Most importantly, we learned how disastrous it can be when our military gets involved in situations where it doesn't belong. But as far as these men can see, those lessons are not being heeded and we are continuing to make the same mistakes.

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<sup>15</sup> Essaf, Jonathan. "Jonathan's Interview." Interview by author. September 8, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Taylor, Mark. *The Vietnam War in History, Literature, and Film*. Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2003.

<sup>17</sup> *Hamburger Hill*. Directed by John Irvin. Performed by Anthony Barrile, Michael Boatman, Don Cheadle. United States: Paramount, 1988. Film.

<sup>18</sup> Taylor, *The Vietnam War in History, Literature, and Film*.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions for Vietnam Veterans

1. When did you serve?
2. Which branch of the military were you in?
3. Where in Vietnam did you serve?
4. What was your job in the military?
5. Were you drafted or did you volunteer for the military?
6. What did you think about the Vietnam War before you were sent to Vietnam?
7. How do you think most people felt about the Vietnam War while you were serving?
8. How did the media portray the Vietnam War during your time in the service?
9. Did you feel like your experience in Vietnam was different from previous you knew about?
10. How did people treat you when you returned from serving in Vietnam?
11. Do you think people's views on the Vietnam War have changed since your time in the service?
12. How do you think the media portrays the Vietnam War now as opposed to when the war was still happening?
13. Do you think people view wars differently since the Vietnam War?
14. How has the media portrayed recent wars differently from the Vietnam War?
15. Do you agree more with the popular opinions about the Vietnam War from the time when the war was still happening or the opinions of the modern day?
16. Why are you returning to Vietnam now?

17. Have your personal feelings about the Vietnam War changed any since returning to Vietnam? If so, how?
18. How do you think the Vietnamese people have treated the Vietnam War differently than Americans?
19. What has been the most important part of returning to Vietnam, for you?



## Appendix B

### Interview Questions for College Students

1. Do you know anyone who served in the Vietnam War?
2. What do you know about the Vietnam War?
3. How do you feel about the American involvement in the Vietnam War?
4. How do you think the media has portrayed the Vietnam War?
5. What do you think about the way the Vietnam War is taught in schools?
6. Do you think the Vietnam War is taught differently than other wars?
7. What do you think most Americans feel about the Vietnam War?
8. Why do you think people feel this way?
9. Do you think the media (news, television, movies, music, etc.) portrays the Vietnam War differently than other wars?
10. What do you think you'll learn in Vietnam?
11. Have you learned anything new about the Vietnam War?
12. What do you now know about the Vietnam War that you didn't know before this trip?
13. Have your feelings about American involvement in the Vietnam War changed since starting this trip?
14. Now, what do you think makes the Vietnam War different from other wars?
15. After this trip, do you think your feelings and opinions on the Vietnam War differ from other Americans? If so, how?

16. How is the Vietnam War viewed by the Vietnamese people as opposed to how it is viewed by Americans?
17. How do the Vietnamese media portray the Vietnam War, compared to American media?

## Appendix C

### Transcript of Narrative

NARRATOR

The Vietnam War. It divided two nations, defined a generation, and left a dark mark on American history. At least, that's one way of looking at it. The Vietnam War came during a critical point in America's history and its aftermath can still be seen today in the faces of the men who served there and in the way our modern society looks back at the Vietnam War.

Since American combat troops arrived in Vietnam in 1965, there have been discussions, debates, and even fights about whether it was right or wrong for the US to get involved in the Vietnam War. In the decades following the war, some people have changed their opinions on the war while others still hold fast to their initial beliefs about the war. Even the way the entire American society views the war has shifted. But it isn't just the US that has changed since the war ended. The nation of Vietnam has also come a long way since, as the Vietnamese call it, the American War. Now, fifty years later, hear from the American men who were there, college students who are studying the war from a millennial perspective, and see Vietnam entering the modern age as J. Austin Duke presents *Apocalypse Then and Now*.

In 1965, Specialist Bobby Starnes arrived in Vietnam with the U.S. Army's First Infantry division, one of the first American combat units to be sent into Vietnam. Bobby Starnes served in Vietnam from 1965 through 1966. Fifty years later, his grandson, Austin Duke, a student from Middle Tennessee State University, arrived in Vietnam as part of a study abroad program with four other students, their professor, seven Vietnam war veterans,

and two other guests. For the next fourteen day, this group traveled from one end of Vietnam to the other. During these two weeks, this film was made, in hotel rooms and in the streets and jungles of Vietnam.

The first American combat troops arrived in Vietnam in 1965, after the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution gave President Lyndon B. Johnson the authority to increase American involvement in Vietnam. This marked what would be seen as the real beginning of what is known in America as the Vietnam War. When this war started, most Americans couldn't find Vietnam on a map. But soon, this corner of southeast Asia would make the news as many young men were sent there. Bobby Starnes, a native of rural Tennessee, was one of these men sent to a strange country nine thousand miles from home in 1965. Another was a young man from Massachusetts named Steve Badger.

(Steve's interview)

NARRATOR

The conflict wore on and the public began to slowly become more aware of the war in Vietnam and its progress. More men were drafted while others volunteered to serve. In Texas, men such as Ed McClure and Ed Stietler joined with no idea of what was in store for them.

(Tex & Ed's Interviews)

NARRATOR

While many of the Americans who served in Vietnam were fresh recruits who were still new to military life, others were already seasoned veterans who had been serving for years. Bob Burke had been in the Marine Corps since 1959 and was already a sergeant when he was sent to Vietnam.

(Bob's Interview)

NARRATOR

As the war continued and people began to form more opinions about America's involvement in the war. When the war began, most Americans either supported the war or were neutral on the subject. After a few years, however, some were beginning to oppose the war for various reasons. One of these reasons was the draft. Scenes of young men burning draft cards were shown on the nightly news all across America. For some, college offered a way to avoid military service. For others it was a way in. Men like Joe Kraszuski and U.S. Grant used their college education to join the military as officers.

(Joe & Sam's Interviews)

### **Tet Offensive & Hue**

NARRATOR

While Americans were only beginning to become divided, the Vietnamese people were already deeply fractured. For the Vietnamese, the war was a civil war to decide the fate of their people. Vietnam was split into two countries in 1954 after the French were defeated. The north became the Democratic Republic of Vietnam under the communist government in Hanoi while the south became the Republic of Vietnam, a democracy with its capital in Saigon. Even within the democracy of South Vietnam there was further division. South Vietnamese citizens who supported the communist regime in the north formed the Viet Cong, a guerrilla force that fought in conjunction with the North Vietnamese regular Army to defeat the Saigon government and unite the country under the communist government.

The greatest shift in public opinion against the war came in 1968 as a result of the Tet offensive. During the Tet offensive, the Viet Cong guerilla forces launched attacks against major cities in South Vietnam. Some of the heaviest fighting occurred in the ancient city of Hue. Today you can still visit the old citadel and royal palace that was once the home of the Vietnamese imperial family. But almost fifty years ago, this was the site of intense combat between the Viet Cong and the US Marines sent to recapture the city. Today, there are still remnants of this battle, such as bullet holes in the citadel wall and bomb craters in the palace complex.

The Tet offensive effectively failed for the communist forces and their goal of starting a popular rebellion in the cities. The South Vietnamese and US forces eliminated the Viet Cong as an effective fighting force. Although the military battle was won, the battle for public opinion was not. Throughout the long months of the Tet offensive, American television sets brought the violence and carnage of the battlefield to the living room. The death blow to mass public support for the war came from one of America's most respected journalists, Walter Cronkite.

(Walter Cronkite)

NARRATOR

From that point on, American support for the war declined. The anti-war movement grew. Protests and demonstrations occurred all over the nation on college campuses and in city streets. Richard Nixon was elected president as the candidate who would get America out of Vietnam. But the anti-war movement was small in comparison to the rest of the American population. By the end of the 1960's, most Americans had simply lost

interest in the war. This was the cultural environment that existed when Doug Woods joined the Marine Corps.

(Doug's Interview)

### **War's End**

NARRATOR

In the early 1970's, Americans were tired of the war. Many became even more frustrated when Richard Nixon authorized an incursion into Cambodia in 1970. The goal of this operation was to eliminate the Viet Cong forces taking refuge in the neutral nation of Cambodia. Although seen by many as an escalation of the war and a break with Nixon's campaign promises, the Cambodian Campaign did accomplish many of its military objectives and the US military was able to decrease its troop strength in Vietnam. In 1973 North and South Vietnam and their allies signed the Paris Peace Accords which called for a cease-fire on January 28, 1973. South Vietnam was to remain a free and democratic nation. Within sixty days, all US combat force withdrew from Vietnam. The treaty also included a caveat that US forces would return if the North violated the treaty. By late 1973, the North Vietnamese Army had invaded South Vietnam and on April 30, 1975, Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, fell. U.S. combat forces did not intervene.

(Sam)

### **After The War**

NARRATOR

American combat involvement in Vietnam lasted for eight years and came to define an entire era of American history. The Vietnam War became part of America's collective psyche. In the years after the war, people began to reflect on the experiences of Vietnam

and try to figure out what we learned there as a nation. In the late 1970's and and 1980's, movies like Apocalypse Now, Rambo, and Platoon attempted to interpret the Vietnam experience and comment on the nature of war.

For some of the men who fought there, their personal opinions on the war also began to shift. Many who joined the military and went to war with the belief that the war was about defending democracy now had a different viewpoint.

(Doug & Ed)

NARRATOR

Others still hold to their original thoughts on the war and maintain that their cause in Vietnam was just.

(Tex & Joe)

### **New Generation**

NARRATOR

American society moved on and grew up. The children of the men who fought in Vietnam had children of their own. To this millennial generation, the Vietnam war was something that their parents and grandparents did before they were even born.

(Student Interviews)

NARRATOR

Other than any relatives they had who fought in the war, the only awareness this generation has of the Vietnam War came from school and the media.

(Student Interviews)



## **Vietnam Today**

NARRATOR

Just as the US has moved on and changed since the Vietnam War, so has Vietnam. Since 1975, Vietnam has been united under the communist government in Hanoi. Images of communism can be seen all over in the form of flags, posters, and even monuments to communist victories in the war.

Although the government is officially a communist regime, for most Vietnamese citizens the affects of communism stop at flag waving and parades. For the most part, the government stays out of people's lives and leaves them to run their businesses and make money how they want.

The way the Vietnamese people look back at the war differs from the American perspective. The Vietnamese people as a whole do not dwell on the war and when they do think about it, they see it as just another war in a long stream of wars.

Although most people do not give much thought to the war, the Vietnamese government has a very particular way that it wants the people to remember the war. The official history of the war is that the Vietnamese were united in a victory against the oppressive Americans. Mentioning south Vietnam as an independent nation or flying the flag of the Republic of Vietnam can be grounds for imprisonment. Only a few remnants of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam are allowed to remain, such as a cemetery in Bien Hoa, where many locals have family members buried.

Despite all this, the US and Vietnam have had normal relations for twenty years and many American companies have factories in Vietnam. Most Vietnamese people are

friendly towards Americans and don't even give a second thought to the violence that once occurred between our two countries.

### **Lessons from Vietnam**

NARRATOR

As we look back at the fifty years since the Vietnam War started, our society's views on the war have changed as the population shifts further and further away from the generation that served in the war.

(Interviews)

NARRATOR

An event as significant as the Vietnam War leaves an undeniable mark on a society's collective psyche. The Vietnam war is part of America's public memory and gets brought up nearly every time the US Government considers going to war. But just what have we learned from our experiences in Vietnam? Do we view war any differently since Vietnam?

(Interviews)

### **Conclusion**

NARRATOR

The men who served in Vietnam are leaving us quicker than we realize. Bobby Starnes passed away in 2004. Each day a few more Vietnam Veterans join him. Soon the Vietnam veterans will go the way of the World War I veterans and there will be no more time to record first hand accounts of the war. But the experiences of the Vietnam War are already part of our nation's public memory. They are part of who we are as Americans and cannot be forgotten. It is up to present and future generations to make sure that the

lessons of Vietnam are not wasted so that we can prevent what seemed like an apocalypse then from happening now.