

Ken Burns' Show Business
Robert S. Griffin
www.robertsgriffin.com

This writing is a commentary on Ken Burns' seven-part documentary series "The War," which aired on PBS in late September-early October, 2007. But before I do that, I'll set out the frame of reference I'll use to make sense of the documentary: what I'm calling the rules for success in show business. I'll look at "The War" through this show-business-success lens.

I think there are four rules that contribute to success in show business. By show business I don't mean just in the conventional meaning of that term, the entertainment industry, movies and television programs, and so on. I mean show business in a broader, more literal sense that includes entertainment but goes beyond that. For the purposes of this consideration of Burns' documentary, show business refers to the process of depicting something to people, pointing it out to them, giving it meaning, and to anyone engaged in that process. That is to say, I'm talking about the business of showing, and about the people whose business it is to show. Film directors of fictional material show things to people, images and dialogue and stories; they are in show business in this literal sense; they show as a business. Novelists do too. And so do documentary filmmakers. Because people deal with nonfiction material doesn't mean they aren't in show business; they show that material to us in a particular way. Similarly, journalists and teachers at all levels of schooling are in show business, the business of showing.

And what do I mean by success in show business? I mean having your audience—whether it be in a movie theater, in front of a television set, in a lecture hall, or reading your words--like and approve of you and accord you credibility and come back for more of what you have to show, and having them respect you and think you've got talent and give you awards and ask you to speak at their meeting or graduation ceremony or sign up for your classes.

So what are the four rules of success in show business as defined in this way?

Rule number one is to confirm your audience's preconceptions. Basically, tell them what they already know and

prefer. Do it in an engaging way and add a new wrinkle here and there, but the basic message to people is “You’ve got it right already.” And stay within their frame of reference. Don’t come on with topics and ideas that are totally foreign to people. The message to the audience needs to be, you know enough, you have it wired, you are on top of things, you’ve got it figured out already.

Rule number two is to make your audience feel good about themselves. Somebody else is dumb, wrong, out of it, misguided, malevolent, anachronistic, and so on, but not your audience. They are cool and on the side of the angels. They are better than those yoyos over there, and there isn’t anything they have to change about themselves, do different, anything like that. They can pat themselves on the back and have a restful night’s sleep.

Rule number three is to keep things simple, clear, and unequivocal. No complications. No ambiguities. No contingencies—this if this happens and this other thing if that happens. No loose ends, no contradictions, no uncertainties, no dilemmas. No equally weighted competing claims. Nothing unresolved. Certainty.

Rule number four is to be personally appealing and to use appealing people as part of your show. This is a complicated rule, because different audiences find different people appealing or attractive. Since I’m going to be focusing on the Burns documentary, I’ll offer that Tom Hanks-type likeability is appealing, attractive, to the middle class PBS/NPR audience—solid nice guy, don’t need to lock your door around Tom Hanks, capable but no big threat, in your league, makes you feel good about yourself. (Tom Hanks has a wise-cracking side—exclude that. For those old enough to remember him, the actor Jimmy Stewart is a better example than Tom Hanks.) Some middle class types find irony and cynicism appealing—Seinfeld, Letterman, “The Simpsons,” “South Park.” Some of all classes and racial and ethnic identities take to “bad boys” (and girls): rap “artists,” L.A. rehab cuties, NASCAR rebels. And some are taken by an Oprah-type someone-who’s-going-through-what-I’m-going-through persona. Perhaps it is enough to say that different people like different qualities in people and that if you want to go over with some group figure out what who they like and give it to them. So if you are putting on a PBS show, decide what types of people are going to be watching and show them the

kind of people they take to. You might not want Robert Downey, Jr. to be on your World War II show.

Three non-Ken Burns examples to illustrate the success-in-showbusiness rules:

- Jon Stewart on Comedy Central. Stewart has a tacit agreement with his audience. Tune in and you aren't going to hear anything that shakes up your worldview and the joke's never going to be on you. The good guys are going to be the good guys and the bad guys are going to be the bad guys. You are never going to hear something that makes you feel dumb or low on the totem pole. Stewart is going to talk about what losers they are, but never what a loser you are lolling around watching Jon Stewart on television and eating Cheetos.

- "60 Minutes." Those people being grilled by Mike Wallace—or I guess now it's Anderson Cooper—are bilking senior citizens out of their pension money and they are lying about it, and you sitting in your living room would never do a terrible thing like that. You are not going to see or hear anything on "60 Minutes" that calls into question anything fundamental that you think or do. "60 Minutes" is never going to challenge you to get off your duff and do something about anything. You are on the moral high ground and that's enough. At the end of the show you can feel comfortable forgetting everything you saw on "60 Minutes" and watch "Sunday Night Football" or "Desperate Housewives." You're just fine.

- Professors who play by these rules go over big with college students. (I'm thinking of those in areas like history, the social sciences and humanities, teacher education, and social work, not those in math, science, technology, or business, although maybe these latter ones play by the rules too.) Confirm students' predispositions, paint a positive image of them for their consumption, and come off as a cool guy by the standards of a twenty-year-old. One good move is to leave room for them to give their opinions—no need for the opinions to be grounded in serious study and reflection--and don't challenge what they say in any way. People love to hear themselves talk, especially when they don't have to do any work to say whatever it is but rather just report whatever

happens to be in their heads at the moment. Do this and the odds are good that even if your course is pap students will love it and you. Offering this is not to contend that this kind of thing characterizes all professors and courses that are highly rated by college students. It is to say, however, that show-business college teaching goes on, and that a lot of what is considered good college teaching these days is closer to a Jon Stewart show than legitimate educating.

We could get into other examples: popular novelists, politicians, self-help gurus, among them, but let's get to looking at Ken Burns' documentary on World War II "The War" from the perspective of the four rules of success in show business. As do all filmmakers, Burns had many collaborators, most notably the writer of the voice-over narration, Geoffrey Ward, but I'll talk about the documentary as if were Burns' creation alone. It would get unwieldy to do otherwise, and anyway, Burns is identified with this film and his vision and mode of expression is the primary impulse in it. Plus, it is convention to talk about films—Hitchcock's, Bergman's, Fellini's—as if there was one person, an auteur (author), behind it.

"The War" gets an A-plus from me for following the four rules of success in show business.

Burns' show—again, in the literal sense of the word, what he showed—confirmed what the vast majority of people, and certainly the kind who tune into PBS, already think about the war. The series conformed to the official Steven Spielberg-Tom Brokaw ("Saving Private Ryan," *The Greatest Generation*) story of the war and those who fought it. World War II was a god-awful bloodbath (the Burns episodes depict one dead body after another, Americans included), but it had to be done, was the right thing to do, and those who fought it (now dying at a rate of a thousand a day) are exemplary Americans and human beings that deserve this nation's undying gratitude. War is hell on earth and in general bad, but clearly World War II was good, The Good War.

The documentary also toed the current party line about tangential issues. Three examples: Segregation was an unmitigated evil, and Negroes, as they were called then, were on the high ground compared to whites no matter what area we are talking about; without exception in this documentary, black trumps white. Also, no problems with Rosie the Riveter, women leaving the home to

become participants in a unisex work force, that was just fine, modern feminism confirmed. And Japanese Americans loyalties were to this country, not Japan, and thus they were good folks and didn't deserve internment, and here is yet another area where white America has been intolerant to minorities—scold, scold.

The series painted a completely positive image of those who participated in the war or otherwise supported it. If you were 84 and sitting in front of your television set with your children and grandchildren, you didn't have to sit through somebody talking about your gullibility and questioning your morality during your younger years. "The War" was a feel-good-about-yourself experience of the first order. This is the kind of show that bears taping for repeat viewings, and the coffee table book on the series is worth picking up at Barnes & Noble (at this writing, the book is high on the New York Times best-seller list).

From the first episode to the last in the Burns documentary, everything was simple, clear, unequivocal, certain—no loose ends, no unresolved issues. That's the way World War II was, period, nothing more to talk about. "The War" was a series of answers, not questions, and that's good show business, especially when the answers are ones people like.

"The War" has a populist cast to it. The "voice of God," omniscient narrator reading Ward's words who informs us of what happened during those years, both in the war itself and on the home front in four representative U.S. cities, is unseen. The on-camera talking heads are now-aged, front-line, low-level combatants in the war and their relatives and friends back home. No big shots on camera: no generals, politicians, scholars, experts, or cable show regulars. This is the World War II as told by those who fought it and held down the home front. Invariably, these people come off as decent, sincere, humble, solid, and sensible, the kind you'd want to have over for Sunday dinner, good folks. Tom Hanks without the smart remarks.

Burns is a bit disingenuous with this, however. Three examples: prominent throughout the seven episodes were "marine pilot" Sam Hynes, "infantryman" Paul Fussel, and "Air Force pilot" Quentin Aanenson, no other identification. I think it is fair to say that these three were billed as every-day Joes that Burns probably found in the phone book. Well, not quite. Sam Hynes is actually the former distinguished Princeton English professor Samuel Hynes who

authored a book on his experiences as a World War II aviator, *Flights of Passage*. Paul Fussell is professor emeritus of the University of Pennsylvania and the author of two books on World War II, *The Great War in Memory* and *Wartime*. Quentin Aanenson wrote, produced, and narrated a documentary called “A Fighter Pilot’s Story” that was broadcast on PBS in the 1990s. These three aren’t exactly the guy down the street. This is no big issue, but it does run counter to the documentary’s guileless self-presentation and raised the question for me, if Burns was slick about this, what else was he slick about?

Although I suspect a few people wish Burns would do something about his hair, “The War” is a sure bet to keep his awards and grants, Charlie Rose appearances, and A-list dinner party invitations coming. Offering this analysis is not to contend that Burns is an out-and-out cynic and hustler. I don’t know Burns and I know very little about his background—I’ve only seen him on television a few times—but my guess is he believes what he shows the public. I think it is human nature to go along with the current accepted wisdom and do what gets you ahead and at the same time honestly believe in what you are doing (or 95%, anyway, and you can pretty much repress that). I think the late psychologist B. F. Skinner had it right: the best way to predict someone’s beliefs and behavior is to analyze the rewards and punishments in their world. And that applies to people who are very bright and talented, as Burns is, and as Hynes, Fussell, and Aanenson are. (What would it have done to Aanenson’s life if he had decided that dropping bombs on civilians made him a war criminal?) What’s scary about this Skinnerian perspective is that it holds out the strong possibility—at least for those of them who aren’t Jewish—that if Burns and the other three had lived in Germany in the 1930s they would have been National Socialists *par excellence*.

Now to a few things that don’t conform to the rules of successful show business but that I think might have presented a more realistic picture of World War II:

An idea, punched up over and over in the documentary’s episodes, is that World War had to happen the way it did. Fifty-five million people killed and untold millions more injured. A cost to the United States according to the documentary of over one trillion in current

dollars (I've seen estimates of well over two trillion, but at these levels it is impossible to comprehend the amount, whatever it actually was). Hundreds of thousands of civilians incinerated by firebombs in Dresden and other cities, and two atomic bombs dropped into the middle of Japanese cities. Incredible physical devastation: cities destroyed, historic landmarks obliterated. One estimate is that bombing and shelling in Germany resulted in four billion cubic meters of rubble—although again, numbers of that magnitude are impossible to fathom. Perhaps the best we can do is bring up images in our minds of the films of Berlin and Hiroshima at the end of the war. In this regard, I recommend one of the great films in the history of cinema, director Alain Resnais' "Hiroshima Mon Amour," which layers a fictional story onto documentary footage of the horror that resulted from the actions of American air force pilots.

The documentary assures us that there was absolutely no way around all of this. "The War" begins and ends with this declaration: the first episode is entitled "The Necessary War," and the dedication at the end of the series is to all those who fought and won "that necessary war." Over and over, every episode, it is "it had to happen," "we had to do it," "there'll always be wars"—absolute certainty, total assuredness, complete comfort in that assumption. While that makes for good show business, wrapping everything up in a neat package and clearing any American involved with that war from personal responsibility for what they did in the war—politicians, generals, troops, those on the home front—I don't buy it. My investigation of the Allies' diplomatic relationships with Germany and Japan reveals possible avenues for negotiated settlements short of that bloodbath. History shows that both Churchill and Roosevelt were hell-bent on war, and they achieved their goal, at incredible cost to the citizens in their countries. Burns is not about to question their intentions or actions; he fawns over both of them.

The atomic bombs had to be dropped on civilian populations in Japan, declares the Burns documentary, because otherwise we would have lost untold thousands in an invasion of Japan. Case closed. One elderly woman in the documentary, smiling, self-assured, shares with us, "You'll never convince anyone of my generation that the atomic bomb wasn't a wonderful thing." But why exactly was the invasion of the Japanese home islands imperative? Japan

had attacked a military target at Pearl Harbor and had, as a consequence, lost its empire, been devastated militarily, and Tokyo had been decimated and hundreds of thousands killed (we are still trying to get over losing two buildings and 3,000 people in 9/11). There is the question of whether the United States actively explored all possible means to end the war before dropping atomic bombs into the middle of cities. In the months prior to Hiroshima, Japan had been sending out peace feelers through intermediaries. The American government had broken the Japanese diplomatic code and knew of this. It knew that the emperor was pressing to end the war. And it realized that survival of the emperor was a key issue with the Japanese. Nevertheless, the United States government chose not to initiate negotiations with Japan, letting it be known that there was room for give and take, but rather issued long-range pronouncements from Potsdam about unconditional surrender. Why exactly did surrender have to be unconditional?

A key unresolved issue is whether the United States sufficiently pondered the morality of the use of the atomic bombs prior to unleashing their horror on civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. For many centuries there has been the doctrine of the "just war," which has held that noncombatants must be treated humanely. Pope John Paul II declared that the "direct and voluntary killing of innocent human beings is always gravely immoral." Victory in war by absolutely any means possible is ethically dubious, and to blithely write off this issue as the Burns documentary did is, in my view, unconscionable.

And not only was the war inevitable to the nation, says "The War," it was inevitable for the individuals who participated in it--which frees them of the need to engage in moral inventorying regarding their own conduct in those years. Why do young men go to war? asks talking head Sam Hynes. His answer: "It's impossible not to. It's a flow in society that carries you downstream." And, according to the documentary, once you are propelled by forces beyond your control into the war, while you might have might have some misgivings about some of the things you did in combat, when it comes down to it they were justified because, well, that's the nature of war and it had to be done. Repeatedly in the series, American soldiers, with a shrug of their shoulders, without discernable remorse or guilt, recount highly questionable actions such as executing prisoners of war. There was no evidence in the

Burns documentary that any of the participants in World War II had questions about the justification of their participation in the war. I especially noted the absence of any concern among the European heritage soldiers about what they were doing in Europe trying to kill their racial and cultural brethren. I wondered about whether African Americans or Jewish Americans would be as ready to kill their own in a war against Zimbabwe or Israel.

The fact of the matter is that it was not impossible to say no to participating in World War II. I recently read a biography of the civil rights activist Bayard Rustin, who spent two years in federal prison for refusing on political and moral grounds to be conscripted into World War II. The Rustin biography indicated that one in six federal prisoners were serving sentences for war resistance. There were 45,000 conscientious objectors to World War II. No survivors from among this group were given voice in the Burns documentary. To do so would have raised the question of whether it is ever justified to deny one's responsibility for choosing one's actions and taking responsibility for them.

Needless to say, a cardinal show business rule is to not, under any circumstances, criticize motherhood. Time and again, the Burns documentary depicts the mothers of the soldiers as passive, benign, saint-like beings waiting silently and fearfully for the news of whether their son would live or die in North Africa or Italy or France or one of the islands in the Pacific. What else could they do but acquiesce when their sons were sent off to war? Again, it was all inevitable; these women had no choice, circumstances were bigger than they were; there was nothing they could do but pray for their son's safe return. Simple, comforting, Mom was OK.

The fact of the matter is that all mothers were not like this. Three mothers of draft-age sons—Frances Sherril, Mary Sheldon, and Mary Ireland—weren't like this. In 1939, they formed the National Legion of Mothers of America to oppose the use of American troops except for defending this country from attack. By the end of the first week, 10,000 women had joined up, and by 1941, the NLMA had four million members. One of them declared, "I have a 21-year-old son and I am going to fight for him. It was too much trouble to bring him into the world and bring him up all these years to have him fight the battles of foreign nations." A few weeks before the Normandy invasion in 1944, Lyrl Clark Van Hying lamented, "Those boys who will be forced to throw their young flesh

against that impregnable wall of steel are the same babies mothers cherished and comforted and brought to manhood. Mother's kiss healed all hurts of childhood. But on invasion day no kiss can heal the terrible hurts and mother won't be there. Mothers have betrayed their sons to the butchers." Ward's script quoted many mothers, but he didn't quote Lyrl Clark Van Hyning. The mothers of the 400,000 American soldiers killed in World War II made choices. As human beings, they were not simply pawns in a chess game. They were responsible for the actions they took with reference to their sons, including whether they turned them over to the butchers.

If there was any question about the merits of World War II, according the Burns account, the Holocaust sealed the deal, as it were. There were nine million Jews in Europe in 1933, the documentary reports, and by 1945 six million of them had died. We see the pictures of bodies piled high after the American liberation of the camps. One American veteran is quoted as saying, "Some people say it didn't happen [obviously referring to the Holocaust]. I was there; I know it happened." No uncertainties, no debate, no ruffled feathers with that account; squares with what we have been taught to believe.

It's not going to win me any prizes, but I offer that it isn't as simple as all that. The memoirs of De Gaulle, Churchill, and Eisenhower after the war didn't discuss the Holocaust. The suffering of Jews was considered as that of one group among many who suffered during the war. The term Holocaust was not applied to the Jews' plight in the war until fifteen years later. Over time, Jewish suffering was reached such salience that to a great extent, in the minds of many if not most, World War II is a backdrop to the Holocaust. The Jews have become *the* victims of World War II. The six million Jewish deaths—a number we all know—obscure another number we aren't taught in school: 29 million European gentiles died in that war.

No one denies that Jews suffered during the war—the issues are around the nature and extent of their suffering. In conventional usage, the Holocaust has three components: the extermination of the European Jewish population was an official policy of the German government; approximately six million Jews died during the Holocaust; and poison gas was used extensively as a method of killing. While there is enormous pressure to accept this

story, there are those who question all three of these elements, and they are not all nut cases and bigots. Those who go public with these questions put themselves in great personal peril: in Europe and Canada they go to jail, and in America they lose their jobs and standing in the community.

The data the Burns documentary cites for the Jewish population total and deaths appear to have come from the United States Holocaust Museum, not the most unbiased of sources. Almanacs and encyclopedias published in the 1930s and '40s differ significantly on Jewish population numbers. As for the soldier "who was there and knows it happened," 80% of the prisoners in the camps liberated by the Americans were non-Jewish, and no one is alleging that poison gas was used in those camps. He undoubtedly witnessed great inhumanity and suffering, including Jewish--some proportion of which may have stemmed from disease and starvation caused by Allied bombing of supply routes to the camps--but he didn't see the Holocaust as it is conventionally defined. This is a very important matter because of allegations, including by Jewish scholars, that Jews have used the Holocaust to extract reparations from Germany, marshal support for the creation of the state of Israel, and evoke special support from the United States as it relates to Israel and the Middle East.

There is also the very difficult question of the degree to which Jews' actions contributed to what happened to them. To what extent did Jewish actions exacerbate their own suffering during the war (as well as the suffering of others)? Here again, the palatable assumption is that whatever happened to the Jews was beyond their control, that nothing they did or didn't do had any effect on their fate. That assumption is arguable. Perhaps if they had dealt with matters differently than they did their fate would have been different from what it was. Understandably, organized Jews lobbied hard for both the America and Britain to go to war against Germany, and it is indisputable that Jewish suffering increased exponentially during World War II. Was Charles Lindbergh prescient in a speech he gave in the fall of 1941 when he said the following?

It is not difficult to understand why Jewish people desire the overthrow of Nazi Germany. The persecution they suffered in Germany would be sufficient to make bitter enemies of any race.

No person with a sense of the dignity of mankind can condone the persecution of the Jewish race in Germany. But no person of honesty and vision can look on their pro-war policy here today without seeing the dangers involved in such a policy both for us and for them. Instead of agitating for war, the Jewish groups in this country should be opposing it in every possible way for they will be among the first to feel its consequences.

Tolerance is a virtue that depends upon peace and strength. History shows that it cannot survive war and devastations. A few far-sighted Jewish people realize this and stand opposed to intervention. But the majority still do not.

Offering this is not to contend that what happened to the Jews during the war was justified or their fault. Rather, it is to say that actions have consequences and that no one, contrary to the theme of the Burns film, is simply a product of external circumstances.

I'm personally in no position to speak in an authoritative way about what actually happened to European Jews in those years beyond saying I believe that they suffered greatly. And I can't say definitively whether organized Jewish efforts were in their own best interests or in the interests of Britain and the United States. I can only say my study leads me to the conclusion that there is room for legitimate dialogue and debate by serious scholars and commentators about the Holocaust, including the actions that led up to it. And more fundamentally, I believe that continued investigation and new findings and interpretations are inherent in history, and that any attempt to suppress investigation, analysis, and free expression is wrong and, however well intended, ultimately harmful. Understandably, we are better able to look back at the injustice of persecuting Galileo for writing that the earth goes around the sun than to see comparable injustices in our own time, but we need to try to do that.

All Ken Burns, or anyone else, can do is put on his particular show. But we in the audience must remember that it is *his* show, not *the*

show. And we need to remember that it is in the interest of anyone who wants to be center stage in the flow of public discourse and personally rewarded to play by what I am calling the rules of show business. Anyone taking in a show—in a movie theater or a classroom, wherever it is--needs to be aware that the people showing them something are likely to try to make themselves look good and their audience feel good. While that is not altogether a bad thing, we shouldn't confuse it with the truth.