

## Watching "The War"

Written by

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Jeff and I have been watching Ken Burns' latest PBS documentary film, *The War*, which, as of this writing, is about halfway through its 15-hour run. We've been faithful viewers – a challenge, since it's also been "season premier week" on the networks, bringing lots of tempting competition after a long, mind-numbing summer. (It's either feast or famine with TV, isn't it?)



I wasn't quite as excited about *The War* as my husband, being a girl and all, but there was never really any question that we would watch. Jeff grew up an Army brat – his dad is a combat veteran of three wars! – so the military culture is deep in his bones. (Plus, he's a boy; he likes tanks and bombs and stuff.) I'm happy to report that *The War* has been well worth our time commitment. In true Burnsian tradition, it's one of those rare documentaries that's not just good for you, but actually good. Education, enlightenment and – here's the kicker – entertainment, all rolled into one. What a concept.

The film focuses on four American towns – Luverne, MN; Mobile, AL; Sacramento, CA; and Waterbury, CT – and how each was affected by the Second World War. By interweaving astonishing combat footage, compelling narration, and extensive interviews with veterans and surviving family members, Burns gives us a rich, nuanced portrait of American life during this extraordinary era, both on the battlefield and the home front. For someone like me, whose knowledge of WWII has consisted, I'm ashamed to say, of bits and pieces, the big picture is a revelation.

The thing I'm most struck by, having now watched about half the film, is that we live in a very different America today than the one the "Greatest Generation" fought so bravely to preserve. For all our advances – scientific, technological, sociological, and otherwise – I can't help wondering if we are worthy of the sacrifices they made. Sometimes, I worry that we've exchanged freedom for licentiousness, self-reliance for self-centeredness. Like spoiled brats who never had to work a day in their lives, I fear we're undeserving of our inheritance. In my less histrionic moments, I just worry that we've let our lives become too complicated, that we've lost our ability to savor simple blessings.

Katherine Phillips, 84, sister of war veteran Sidney Phillips, describes growing up in old Mobile: "On a hot summer evening, of course there was no air conditioning, so Daddy would load us in the car and we'd drive downtown to Brown's Ice Cream ... and then we'd drive out to Arlington and park by the bay, and all sit there and enjoy the sea breeze. And when we'd cooled down enough, he'd bring us home and everybody could go to bed. But, oh, we just sat on our porch in the evening and the children played in the yard. It was a wonderful way to grow up."

You readers know I suffer from Chronic Nostalgia Syndrome, always pining wistfully for the "good old days" that, in reality, probably weren't that good. My husband likes to tease me about my longing for the past. "Would you really want to live in Jane Austen's era?" he'll ask. "No electricity... no plumbing... no frappacinos...?"

He has a point. And even 1940s America, with all its modern accommodations, had its problems. To his credit, Ken Burns does not gloss them over.

For instance, Mobile, despite its beautiful setting and cosmopolitan population, was a city deeply divided by race. This division grew even more severe as the once-sleepy town became a booming wartime producer of ships and airplane parts, while Jim Crow laws prevented blacks from sharing in the bounty.

Even the diverse farming town of Sacramento suffered the effects of prejudice. Almost 7000

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Japanese Americans lived there – doctors, lawyers, teachers, shop owners, and some of the most productive farmers in America. In the years leading up to the war, relations between Japanese Americans and other Californians grew tense. In 1942, those tensions exploded, as Japanese residents of Sacramento, with one week's notice, were forced to abandon their homes, farms and businesses and move inland to internment camps, where most would spend the remainder of the war behind barbed wire, guarded by soldiers with machine guns.

But elsewhere, ethnic diversity was not disruptive; being "American" was what mattered most. Waterbury, CT, was an immigrant town where almost half the population was from somewhere else – mostly Italy, Ireland, and Eastern Europe. The town consisted of close-knit, ethnic neighborhoods, where many people lived out their entire lives. Families packed several generations into triple-decker homes and row houses, surrounding bustling business districts with markets, shops, churches, and theaters.

"Everybody watched out for everybody else," says Anne DeVico, who grew up in Waterbury. "If I went outside, five minutes later everybody in the whole neighborhood would know it, because that's what they did. They watched out for everyone. So it was wonderful. I loved growing up like that."

In the tiny Midwestern town of Luverne, MN, the same feeling prevailed. Says resident Jim Sherman, "I think it was a pretty close-knit community. There was a saying that if you don't want people to know about it, you don't do it. And everybody knew pretty much everybody else in town."

Though as far removed from the action as it could possibly have been, when Luverne boys started heading off to war, the whole town got involved, like every town across America. They planted Victory gardens and held scrap metal drives and cheerfully tolerated food rationings. Residents even got together and made a wrapping-paper letter that stretched 120 feet, then mailed it off to their hometown boys who were training in Kodiak, Alaska.

The response from one of those hometown boys:

Dear Kay and Everybody:

I wanted to let you know that the battery received the swell letter that was written on and around the 4th of July. The boys are really having a time reading it. They're on their hands and knees and have the paper strung from one end of the barracks to the other. It's things like this that make us feel pretty darn good. In case you don't remember me, I used to sling hash in Gimm and Byrnes restaurant. I was the tall slim fellow who used to work with Fred Gimm. Tell him hello for me. Well, Kay, I'll cut this off here. We'll promise to get all the damned Japs that stick their noses in around here.

Thanks from all of us.

As ever,  
Vernon A. Fremstand

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Gulp. Doesn't the innocence just kill you? These were the days when young men felt honor-bound to defend their country; they said things like "swell" and "pretty darn good." There's even something touching about Vernon A. Fremstad's swaggering promise to get all the "damned Japs." In that simpler, less progressive age, if someone brazenly attacked your country out of the blue, murdering thousands of your citizens, you were allowed to call them names without reproach. We're more sophisticated now, and I'm sophisticated enough to be glad that we're more sophisticated, and yet...

There I go getting wistful again. Because, you see, what captures me most about Burns' documentary is this moving portrait of 1940s America. With all of its immigrants, all its diverse ethnic influences – even with its racial tensions – it was a country made up of close-knit towns, made up of close-knit neighborhoods, made up of even closer-knit families. And it was a country bound together against a common enemy, standing side by side for a cause far greater than any petty, or even profound, differences its citizens might have had. Those citizens faced the same fears, made the same sacrifices, suffered the same losses, and celebrated the same victories. Together. As Americans.

Today, we're embroiled in a very different war, facing a very different kind of enemy. A majority of us no longer believes in that war, and many of us never did, and there is much disagreement about who the enemy really is, or if there even is an enemy. We spend lots of time arguing about whether or not we should be at war, and even more time second-guessing and disparaging those who put us there. We bitch and we blame and we blog, and solidarity continues to elude us.

When a war is couched in this much ambiguity – when there is so little agreement about its justification, so little trust in the leaders who initiated it – there can be no commonality, no shared suffering nor shared victory. With a war like this one, we're bound to be fractured, antagonistic, polarized, aren't we? It's not our fault, right? It's just this damned war. We haven't changed. Americans haven't changed. Have we?

Jim Sherman, 72, of Luverne, MN remembers what it was like to be a child in America during World War II:

"People had the victory gardens and the scrap drives... and there were parades and all these things that got people into this patriotic feeling. It was a totally different feeling that I don't think can ever be duplicated, ever. I just don't think that you could have that sense of oneness that we had when we were growing up."

Unfortunately, I agree with Jim Sherman. We've lost that "sense of oneness." But can we really blame that loss on the Iraq war? World War II didn't make the Greatest Generation great; it merely gave them an occasion to rise to, a chance to prove their collective character. We have our own crucial challenges today. Do we have it in us to face them together, as Americans? I wonder.

For more about Ken Burns' excellent documentary *The War*, visit [www.pbs.org/thewar/](http://www.pbs.org/thewar/)