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SMALL SCREEN HISTORIES: PRESENTING THE PAST ON AMERICAN  
TELEVISION, 1949-2017

by

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A dissertation submitted to the

School of Graduate Studies

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in Communication, Information and Library Studies

Written under the direction of

Dr. David Greenberg

And approved by

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New Brunswick, New Jersey

MAY, 2019

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

SMALL SCREEN HISTORIES: PRESENTING THE PAST ON AMERICAN  
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Dissertation Director: Dr. David Greenberg

*Small Screen Histories* examines the diverse ways that producers of television documentaries and docudramas have packaged American history for TV audiences since the earliest days of the medium. History-themed television programs have become quite popular in the last few decades, a phenomenon that is usually traced to the broadcast of Ken Burns's *The Civil War* in 1990 and the launch of the History Channel in 1995. My research takes up questions of interpretation, ideology, narrative, genre, economics, race, class, and gender across five noteworthy series: *Crusade in Europe* (1949), CBS's *You Are There* (1953-1957), and ABC's *Roots* (1977), as well as Ken Burns's *The Civil War* and *The Vietnam War* (2017). Though there have been many excellent scholarly analyses of history programs on television, my dissertation is the first to take an historical perspective, examining how television filmmakers have created usable pasts that speak to concerns about capitalism, liberal internationalism, democracy, McCarthyism, the Civil Rights Movement, and the polarization of domestic politics.

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## **Introduction: Small Screen Histories**

*Our American past always speaks to us with two voices: The voice of the past, and the voice of the present.*

- Daniel Boorstin<sup>1</sup>

*Our history is all too familiar and perplexing, so to deal with it we have created the myth of television.*

- Horace Newcomb<sup>2</sup>

In October 2017, White House Chief of Staff John Kelly caused a bit of a stir with some comments he had made during a Fox News interview concerning Robert E. Lee and the American Civil War. Responding to ongoing debates over the removal of Confederate statues and war memorials from public spaces around the country, Kelly had suggested that it was perhaps unwise, and even dangerous, to impose our modern sensibilities onto the past. “I would tell you that Robert E. Lee was an honorable man who gave up his country to fight for his state,” the retired Marine Corps general explained, adding that it had been “the lack of an ability to compromise [that had] led to the Civil War, and men of good faith on both sides made their stand where their conscience had [them] make their stand.”<sup>3</sup> This interpretation of Civil War history provoked a swift reaction from journalists and historians, who glimpsed in Kelly’s references to honor, conscience, and compromise the outlines of a discredited Lost Cause narrative – a once dominant reading of the Civil War that framed the Confederate cause as a just and noble struggle for states’

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel J. Boorstin, introduction to *An American Primer*, ed. Daniel Boorstin (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), xiii.

<sup>2</sup> Horace Newcomb, *TV: The Most Popular Art* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 260.

<sup>3</sup> “John Kelly Full Interview with Laura Ingraham on Fox News,” YouTube video, 00:22:39, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XIPfK0z6nLc>, accessed June 2, 2018.

rights, emphasized the genteel virtues of the antebellum South, and downplayed the role of slavery as a causal factor.<sup>4</sup> When pressed on the Chief of Staff's comments during a press briefing the day after the interview aired, White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders defended Kelly, saying "I do know that many historians, including Shelby Foote, in Ken Burns'[s] famous Civil War documentary, agreed that a failure to compromise was a cause of the Civil War."<sup>5</sup>

While the question of whether or not the Civil War was avoidable remains a matter of ongoing historiographical debate, for some observers, Sanders' citation of Ken Burns's landmark PBS series as an authoritative source for Confederate-friendly mythologies seemed like a bizarre defense. Indeed, Burns himself took to Twitter a few hours later to correct the White House's apparent misinterpretation of his film, affirming that "many factors contributed to the Civil War. One caused it: Slavery."<sup>6</sup> Yet since its premier in 1990, a number of historians have criticized *The Civil War* for precisely this kind of southern romanticism. Especially problematic, they argued, was Burns's overreliance on Foote, whose Mississippi drawl and cracker-barrel style made him a telegenic talking head, but he had tended to disconnect slavery from the war and to valorize Confederate generals like Lee and Nathan Bedford Forrest (who, after the war, became a leader of the Ku Klux Klan) in a way that had fit a little too snugly with the Lost

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<sup>4</sup> See for example Jelani Cobb, "John Kelly's Bizarre Mythology of the Civil War," *The New Yorker* (Nov. 1, 2017), <https://bit.ly/2IJHGz8>, accessed June 4, 2018; Philip Bump, "Historians Respond to John F. Kelly's Civil War Remarks: 'Strange,' 'Sad,' 'Wrong,'" *The Washington Post* (Oct. 31, 2017), <https://wapo.st/2kObli8>, accessed June 4, 2018. See also David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2001), 255-299.

<sup>5</sup> "Press Briefing by Press Secretary Sarah Sanders," *WH.gov* (Oct. 31, 2017), <https://bit.ly/2JeUuVF>, accessed June 2, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Ken Burns, Twitter post, October 31, 2017, 5:14 p.m., <https://twitter.com/KenBurns/status/925471048975429632>

Cause tradition.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, given Foote's prominence in *The Civil War*, the columnist Jonathan Chait granted it was indeed likely that Kelly had learned his historical "nonsense" from the series, noting how the general's claims were an "almost verbatim recapitulation" of Foote's account.<sup>8</sup>

For many observers, the flap over Kelly's comments had encapsulated the fraught racial politics of the Trump era, the administration's equivocation on white supremacy, and its "alternative" relationship with facts – historical or otherwise. But the incident also demonstrated the powerful influence that television has in shaping popular memory of historical events.

To be sure, much of the current cultural status of the historical documentary is tied to Ken Burns's own celebrated career. Spanning four decades and including such critically acclaimed films as *Baseball* (1994), *Jazz* (2001), *The War* (2007), *The National Parks* (2009), and most recently *The Vietnam War* (2017), Burns's has become a household name in the United States. He has been described as "the master film chronicler of America's past," and one of the most influential documentary filmmakers of all time.<sup>9</sup> In explaining his success, Burns has often pointed to the failures of professional historians and their inability – or unwillingness – to extend their message beyond their own tribe. "Remember" he explained in his own contribution to the 1994 volume, *Ken*

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<sup>7</sup> See the contributions by Eric Foner and Leon F. Litwack in Robert Brent Toplin, ed., *Ken Burns's The Civil War: Historians Respond* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). See also Ta-Nehisi Coates, "Why Do So Few Blacks Study the Civil War?" *The Atlantic* (2011), <https://theatlantic.com/2011/06/04/why-do-so-few-blacks-study-the-civil-war/>, accessed June 4, 2018; James M. Lundberg, "Thanks a Lot, Ken Burns," *Slate.com* (June 7, 2011), <https://slate.me/2wFWoLy>, accessed June 4, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Chait, "Sarah Sanders Claims John Kelly Learned Civil War Nonsense from Ken Burns. She's Probably Right," *New York* (Oct. 31, 2017), <https://nym.ag/2LnJQNC>, accessed June 4, 2018. Not everyone agreed with Chait's assessment. Cf. Alyssa Rosenberg, "The Debate Over John Kelly and Ken Burns's 'The Civil War' is Making Us Stupider," *The Washington Post* (Nov. 1, 2017), <https://wapo.st/2Hk0k6q>, accessed June 4, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Zoglin, "Feats of Progress," *Time*, February 3, 1992; Deanna Wong, "Most Influential Docs & Makers," *Real Screen Magazine* (December 1, 2002), <https://bit.ly/2UTjvLp>, accessed February 12, 2019.

*Burns's The Civil War: Historians Respond*, “until we adopted the German academic model at the end of the nineteenth century, our greatest historians, like Parkman and Adams, were essential amateurs, popular writers concerned with speaking to large audiences, not just a handful of colleagues unconcerned with *how* one wrote.”<sup>10</sup>

But apart from Burns's considerable oeuvre, historical documentaries and docudramas have been a part of American television's repertoire since the earliest days of the medium. Beginning with network television's inaugural season, series like those discussed in this study – the March of Time adaptation of Dwight D. Eisenhower's war memoir *Crusade in Europe* (ABC, 1949), CBS's combination historical drama/TV newscast, *You Are There* (1953-1957), and David Wolper's serialization of Alex Haley's bestselling family saga *Roots* (ABC, 1977) – have projected national history into American living rooms for over eight decades. Given this longstanding tradition and its vast expansion in recent years (now with entire networks devoted to the subject), it may be likely, as television historian Gary Edgerton has suggested, that more Americans get their information about history from television than from any other source.<sup>11</sup>

A corollary of this “boom in history,” as one historian has described the phenomenon, has been a growing response from scholars and cultural critics who have been interested in exploring the problems and possibilities associated with televised

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<sup>10</sup> Ken Burns, “Four O’Clock in the Morning Courage,” in *Ken Burns's The Civil War: Historians Respond* ed. Robert Brent Toplin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 161 (emphasis in original). For similar statements, see David Thelen, “The Movie Maker as Historian: Conversations with Ken Burns,” *Journal of American History* 81, no. 3 (1994): 1032-33; Ian Parker, “Ken Burns's American Canon,” *The New Yorker* (September 4, 2017), <https://bit.ly/2elPzEs>, accessed February 12, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Gary R. Edgerton, “Television as Historian: A Different Kind of History Altogether,” in *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age*, ed. Gary R. Edgerton and Peter C. Rollins (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 1.



representations of the past.<sup>12</sup> Pushing back against the assumption (popular among some critics) that television is fundamentally unsuited to promote historical understanding, these writers have generally sought to understand the ways in which the medium has offered new ways of present-ing the past that pose alternatives to the epistemological assumptions of academic historiography – ways of interpreting the past that inevitably reflect the sensibilities of the present.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, it is commercial television’s *presentism* – its (sometimes distorting) preoccupation with the live, the immediate, and the emergent – through which the medium’s interventions in historical representation have been situated. Though most professional historians try to avoid the tendency to interpret the past in terms of the present (though whether this is entirely possible or desirable is up for debate), television filmmakers often proudly bring contemporary perspectives to their interpretations.<sup>14</sup> In this context, the connection between past and present becomes a means of making history accessible to contemporary audiences. Rather than focusing solely on historiographical content, therefore, studies of history on television have

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Evans, “What is History? – Now,” in *What is History Now?* ed. David Cannadine (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 12. Key contributions to this field include Edgerton and Rollins’ *Television Histories: Collective Memory in the Media Age*; *The Historian, Television, and Television History*, eds. Graham Roberts and Philip M. Taylor (Luton, UK: University of Luton Press, 2001); *History and the Media*, ed. David Cannadine (New York: Palgrave, 2004); *Re-Viewing Television History: Critical Issues in Television Historiography*, ed. Helen Wheatley (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007); Ann Gray and Erin Bell, *History on Television* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Popular Culture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (London: Routledge, 2016); Mia E. M. Treacey, *Reframing the Past: History, Film and Television* (New York: Routledge, 2016). Precursors included Colin McArthur, *Television and History* (London: The British Film Institute, 1980); and John E. O’Connor (ed.) *American History/American Television: Interpreting the Video Past* (New York: Frank Ungar Publishing, 1983).

<sup>13</sup> Edgerton, “Television as Historian.” Cf. Frederic Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: New Press, 2002), 127-144; Stephen Heath, “Representing Television,” in *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990).

<sup>14</sup> For more on presentism, see Lynn Hunt, “Against Presentism,” *Perspectives on History* (May 2002), <https://bit.ly/1FbIJf4>, accessed June 6, 2018; and David Hackett Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970). Cf. Keith Jenkins, “Introduction: On Being Open About our Closures,” in *The Postmodern History Reader*, ed. Keith Jenkins (New York: Routledge, 1997): 1-25.

typically examined documentaries and dramatic series as expressions of collective memory: as part of a continuous, collaborative process of reconfiguring the shared past in ways that resonate with the needs of the present.

*Small Screen Histories* expands upon this earlier work by adopting a specifically historical framework to examine the ways in which the producers of what I call *history television* (following the historian Robert Rosenstone's concept of the *history film*<sup>15</sup>) have used the past not only as a source of compelling narrative content, but also as a means by which to engage with contemporary concerns about, for example, postwar tensions between the Soviet Union and the West; the Red Scare and ideological conformity in the early 1950s; the enduring legacies of slavery and racial discrimination; and the fracturing of the American political landscape at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In particular, I am interested in examining how history television has contributed to a "usable past," a term first coined by the cultural critic Van Wyck Brooks and later elaborated by the historian Henry Steele Commager, which understands collective memory – a sense of collective historical experience and shared inheritance – as the anchor of national culture and identity.<sup>16</sup> The producers of history television, then, are engaged not only in representing the past as an accumulation of facts, as a sequence of events, or a chronicle of the actions of "great" men and women (though some of it is precisely this). By framing their narratives to emphasize particular themes and by making connections between the conflicts of the past and the enduring social and political issues of the present, the

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<sup>15</sup> Rosenstone identifies the history film as any film presentation which "evokes and makes meaningful the world of the past." See his *History on Film/Film and History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012), xi.

<sup>16</sup> Van Wyck Brooks, "On Creating a Usable Past," *The Dial* (April 11, 1918): 337-341; Henry Steele Commager, "The Search for a Usable Past," *American Heritage* 16, no. 2, February 1965, <https://www.americanheritage.com/content/search-usable-past>.

producers of history television shape collective memory to make claims about the present, and to inspire the future.

### *Collective Memory, Television, and the Nation*

Contemporary interest in memory studies is typically traced back to the work of French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, whose 1925 book *Social Frameworks of Memory* was one of the first studies to systematically engage with memory as a social phenomenon. Arguing that our individual memories are always structured and “interpenetrated” by the social milieu in which we live, Halbwachs maintained that it was only through interpersonal relationships and group settings that we are provided with the opportunity to remember. “It is in society that people normally acquire their memories,” Halbwachs wrote, and “it is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories.” The implication of this argument is that our recollections tend to vary according to the social settings in which we find ourselves at any given moment – whether we remember among family, friends, colleagues, or strangers. For Halbwachs and his successors, therefore, memory is as much about the present as it is about the past; as much about the social context of *collective* memory as it is about individual recollection.<sup>17</sup>

As television scholar Horace Newcomb observed nearly fifty years ago, television has long relied on a special sense of historical consciousness for much of its aesthetic definition. Examining dramatic genres in particular, Newcomb writes that the “television formula” – a set of figurative patterns that he associates with shared cultural values –

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<sup>17</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 44, 38.

“requires that we use our contemporary historical concerns as subject matter ... so as to call attention to our own social problems.” In a mythic and historical western like *Gunsmoke*, or *The Virginian*, for instance, where issues of race or the advance of civilization are central to the plot, “what has happened is that we have taken a contemporary concern and placed it, for very specific reasons, in an earlier time ... there the values and issues are more clearly defined. Certain modes of behavior, like violence, are more permissible.”<sup>18</sup> Beyond the mythoi that inflect westerns, mysteries, and situation comedy, television’s “ritualistic, event-style coverage and capacity for endless repetition,” as media scholar Steve Anderson has noted, have made the medium seem an “ideal facilitator of cultural memory.” In particular, television’s contribution to moments of national remembrance and national trauma – the assassination of JFK, D-Day anniversaries, the terrorist attacks on September 11 – have played a critical role in establishing which memories are essential to the construction of national identity.<sup>19</sup>

It is important to note, however, that the emphasis on national address and national memory is not an inherent feature of television and broadcasting technologies. Rather (as I will discuss more fully in Chapter 1), the sense of shared, national participation in television memories has been made possible by the historical development of the broadcasting industry in the United States, which, as a result of intensive public policy debates in the 1920s and 1930s, was structured on a model of private ownership favoring the construction of large national networks.<sup>20</sup> As a result of

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<sup>18</sup> Horace Newcomb, *TV: The Most Popular Art*, 258-59.

<sup>19</sup> Steve Anderson, “Loafing in the Garden of Knowledge: History TV and Popular Memory,” *Film & History* 30, no. 1 (2000): 16. See also Martia Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 24.

<sup>20</sup> See Robert W. McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy: The Battle for Control of U.S. Broadcasting, 1928-1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 347-361.

these developments, commercial broadcasters developed a universal mode of address that appealed to national markets – and more specifically, to national advertisers.<sup>21</sup> In this way, television broadcasting has functioned as what Marita Sturken has called a “technology of memory:” as a social practice of representation “through which memories are shared, produced, and given meaning.”<sup>22</sup>

Likewise, by engaging with pivotal moments and key issues in American history, producers of history television have often used the past to clarify the complexities of the present, and to make specific claims about American identity. For Ken Burns, for instance, the Civil War is a fascinating subject not only because it was “the most defining and shaping event in American history,” but also because it “continues to speak to central questions of our present time.”<sup>23</sup> Crucial among these, as Gary Edgerton has observed, are “questions of slavery, race relations and continuing discrimination; the rapidly changing roles of women and men in society; the place of federal versus local government in civic affairs; and the individual struggle for meaning and conviction in modern life,” all of which are addressed by *The Civil War* in terms of their enduring relevance to national culture and civic life.<sup>24</sup> Other history television programs have taken a similar approach to the past. Broadcast during the era of McCarthy during the 1950s – and for the most part penned by three blacklisted scriptwriters – the dramatic historical anthology series *You Are There* focused many of its episodes on moments in

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<sup>21</sup> Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920-1934* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian University Press, 1994); Hilmes, Michele, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1920-1952* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Douglas, Susan, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination, from Amos 'n' Andy and Edward R. Murrow to Wolfman Jack and Howard Stern* (New York: Times Books, 1999).

<sup>22</sup> Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 9-10.

<sup>23</sup> Burns, “Four O’Clock in the Morning Courage,” 164-83.

<sup>24</sup> Edgerton, “Television as Historian,” 5.

American (and more broadly, Western) history that spoke allegorically to the climate of fear and enforced ideological conformity in which the contemporary United States found itself. Episodes like “The Witch Trial at Salem,” “The Fate of Nathan Hale,” and the “Death of Socrates” had each allowed the creative team behind *You Are There* to highlight the moral courage of figures from the past, who might serve as guides or inspirations in the present.

By invoking the past as a heritage common to all of its diverse and geographically diffuse audience, history television has become a technical means of representing the nation as what Benedict Anderson has called an “imagined community.” For Anderson, the nation is “*imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” The nation is imagined as a *community*, meanwhile, because “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.”<sup>25</sup> A sense of shared history and tradition is crucial to imagining the community of the nation, and involving a dialectic of memory and forgetting through which members of the nation are continually urged to remember a shared past while discontinuities are downplayed or elided. Referring to the U.S. Civil War, for example, Anderson notes how “a vast pedagogical industry works ceaselessly to oblige young Americans to remember/forget the hostilities of 1861-65 as a great ‘civil’ war between ‘brothers,’” rather than dwell on the serious

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<sup>25</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (New York: Verso, 2006), 6-7.

enmities of sectionalism that had led to the war and which smoldered long after the conflicted ended.<sup>26</sup>

### *Chapter Prospectus*

*Small Screen Histories* proceeds as a set of five case studies of history television series arranged chronologically, beginning with the very first season of network television in the United States, and continuing to 2017. Each chapter contains two major components: First, a production history, which relies on a combination archival sources, contemporary articles and reviews from popular and trade publications, and a collection of relevant secondary source materials. Where possible, I have included sources that speak to contemporary audience reception – though, for the most part, fan mail associated with each of the series under examination has been tough to come by, the exception being *Roots*: a preponderance of fan mail (and critical mail) directed to author Alex Haley, Executive Producer David Wolper, or the ABC network has been preserved by the David L. Wolper Center at the University of Southern California’s Doheny Library.

Second, each chapter includes a textual analysis section, which examines overarching themes and narrative structure, paying particular attention to how the writers and producers of each series framed their interpretation of the past to speak about contemporary issues and concerns. In Chapter 2, for example, I argue that the 1949 *March of Time* adaptation of General Dwight D. Eisenhower’s bestselling war memoir, *Crusade in Europe* (1949), can be understood as a modern video epic that recounted World War II as heroic struggle waged between competing ideologies, and which

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 201. See also Caroline E. Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

conveyed to the television audience the key tenants of Eisenhower's cold war philosophy of military preparedness and international cooperation.

Chapter 3 examines the innovative CBS series *You Are There* (1953-1957), a combination TV newscast and dramatic historical anthology series hosted by Walter Cronkite, in terms of its well-documented anti-anti-Communist allegories. In particular, this chapter discusses the ways in which the three blacklisted writers who worked on the series – Abraham Polonsky, Arnold Manoff, and Walter Bernstein, each of whom had been drummed out of the film industry for their associations with the American Communist Party – utilized the stories associated with pivotal moments in the Western canon (the death of Socrates, the execution of Joan of Arc, the Salem witch trials) to make statements about the contemporary climate of fear and paranoia that the writers viewed as a threat to cherished American freedoms, and also, to register their own resentments about those who had betrayed friends and colleagues by appearing as friendly witnesses before the House Un-American Activities Committee. In addition to analyzing these episodes, Chapter 3 also examines several of the *You Are There* episodes that were written by non-blacklisted writers that elaborated more conventional themes in U.S. and Western history.

Chapter 4 examines the groundbreaking TV miniseries *Roots* (1977), paying particular attention to how the series presented a story about an African American family from slavery to the Reconstruction era that appealed to a majority white audience. Broadcast just a few years after the height of the civil rights and black power movements, Executive Producer David Wolper and his team had expanded the original narrative of Alex Haley's bestselling book to emphasize certain white characters, casting well-known



white actors from film and television as a reassurance to white audience members. As a result, the series was, at the time of its broadcast, criticized for its portrayal of slavery, which some felt to be at best sanitized and at worst nostalgic. At the same time, however, the appearance of so many recognized black actors in the high-profile dramatic series, and the appearance of a story about slavery and a black family for the first time on American television had broken new ground.

Taking a slightly different perspective, Chapter 5 presents an analysis of two films by Ken Burns: *The Civil War* (1990), and his more recent series *The Vietnam War* (2017). In comparing these two films based on their central themes, historical interpretation, and contemporary reception, I argue that each, like *Crusade in Europe* in Chapter 2, constitutes a non-fiction video epic, which focuses on trauma, reconciliation, and consensus in terms of a larger project of framing national identity.

Before commencing with the analysis of individual history television programs, however, Chapter 1 of *Small Screen Histories* begins by examining the concept of the “usable past” in American history, and how the construction of national identity in history television programs in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries continues a tradition in American culture that stretches back to the nation’s founding. In examining the development of American broadcasting on the model of national commercial networks, Chapter 1 also argues that as a “technology of memory,” history television privileges national, rather than local or regional identities. Finally, Chapter 1 concludes with an examination of two broadcast precursors of history television – what we might call history radio – *Americans All*, *Immigrants All*, and *Cavalcade of America*, both of which aired on network radio in the 1930s and constructed a usable past for

contemporary audiences based on perceived needs of a rapidly expanding democratic society.

## **Chapter One: Broadcasting, History, Nation**

In his 1965 essay, “The Search for a Usable Past,” the Henry Steele Commager described how it was that the United States, the first of the modern nations, faced a problem of national identity upon achieving political independence in the late eighteenth century. A successful nationalism, Commager explained, derived from a sense of community rooted in a shared history, tradition, and memory. Unlike many of the independent nation-states that would emerge in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that could draw upon ancient cultural and ancestral ties – nations like France, Germany, Italy, Iceland, or Israel – the newly independent United States had little such history of its own. In the Old World, Commager wrote, “the nation was a product of history.” In the United States, “history was rather a creation of the nation.” The task before Americans in the first decades of their independence, then, was to furnish themselves with a *usable past*: with the legends, myths, songs, symbols, and literature that would nourish the incipient bonds of national identity – though for much of the country’s history, this national identity would be firmly linked with racial and ethnic ones.<sup>1</sup>

For Commager, as well as for other more recent theorists of nationalism, the constitutive work of developing and maintaining such a usable past has been largely a function of public culture.<sup>2</sup> From the early years of the Republic and well into the

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<sup>11</sup> Henry Steele Commager, “The Search for a Usable Past,” *American Heritage* 16, no. 2, February 1965, <https://www.americanheritage.com/content/search-usable-past>. Prior to Commager’s writing, the term “usable past” had been employed by the cultural critic Van Wyck Brooks in his April 1918 article, “On Creating a Usable Past.”

<sup>2</sup> In his classic study of nationalism, Benedict Anderson emphasized the formative role of eighteenth century print capitalism in creating the intellectual, cultural, and economic conditions under which the “imagined community” of the nation could arise and thrive. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. Ed. (New York: Verso, 2006), 37-46. See also David Waldstreicher, “Rites of Rebellion, Rites of Assent: Celebrations, Print Culture, and the Origins of

nineteenth century, several generations of American belletrists, artists, songwriters, folklorists, and public officials filled in an elaborate legendarium upon which a national inheritance could be founded: The Pilgrims at Plymouth, Washington crossing the Delaware and later wintering at Valley Forge, Benjamin Franklin and his puffy rolls, the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Lewis and Clark exploring the vastness of the American west, Francis Scott Key at Fort McHenry, Old Hickory, the Bald Eagle, the Stars and Stripes, Lincoln the rail-splitter, Uncle Sam, and so on. “Nothing in the history of American nationalism is more impressive than the speed and the lavishness with which Americans provided themselves with a usable past,” Commager wrote, and by 1865 (though he made exceptions for Mark Twain, Bret Harte, and Louisa May Alcott), the work had largely been completed.

But while Commager’s essay accounted for some of the most perdurable symbols and mythoi of American nationalism – at least from the perspective of the mid-twentieth century – he perhaps overstated the extent to which the creation of a (singular) usable past was an even and univocal process. Indeed, for much of the nineteenth century, a variety of social groups and regional interests had competed for political and cultural power, leading to sharp divisions over expressions of public memory, patriotism, and national identity. As both John Bodnar and Michael Kammen have shown, while the nation-state – and specifically the Revolution and Founding generation – had provided the framework for public memory during the early years of the Republic, as American society became increasingly fragmented by class, ethnic, and sectional tensions after 1830, deference to the official symbols of national patriotism began to give way to a

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American Nationalism,” *The Journal of American History* 82, no. 1, June 1995, 37-61; Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2010), 24-46.

diversity of vernacular expressions of memory and tradition. The emergence of Davy Crockett as a patriotic symbol for the common people, for instance, or the appropriation of Revolutionary era figures as champions of economic justice by labor organizations, or even the tendency to abjure the past in favor of present and future progress, all sat more easily with the democratic ethos of antebellum America, in which the power and influence of the nation-state “was something to be feared and limited.”<sup>3</sup>

It wasn't until the period after 1870 that the nation-state began to regain political and cultural power as a framework for public memory; though its power was still effectively rivaled by competing vernacular interests. In the intensive economic expansion of these years, sharp conflict between the interests of an emerging business class and those of workers, farmers, immigrants, and other groups – as well as lingering tensions between North and South – had eventually created a desire for a political consensus organized around mutual interest in a vigorous national economy and a centralized state apparatus that transcended its constituents and could mediate between them. Nurtured in large part by corporate leaders (both Northern and Southern), reformers, and a growing middle-class searching for a firm basis for economic prosperity and social cohesion, the drive towards an integrative nation-state was accompanied by a renewed search for usable past – for histories that could inspire the generous expressions of patriotism and loyalty required to cement national unity.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 13-14, 22-28; Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 40-61. See also Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The National Experience* (New York: Random House, 1965), 327-90.

<sup>4</sup> Bodnar, 21-35. See also Merle Curti, *The Roots of American Loyalty* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1967), 173-199.

Civic anniversaries, holidays, and public commemorations became key venues for promoting this kind of usable, national past. In addition to annual Memorial Day and Fourth of July celebrations, a procession of national and municipal centennials in the 1870s and 1880s (chief among these were the U.S. Centennial in 1876, the Constitutional Centennial in 1887, and the Centennial of Washington's First Inaugural in 1889) had all occasioned spectacular displays of patriotic nationalism that featured parades, fireworks, pageantry, and – often as a centerpiece of the festivities – soaring moral-historical orations that addressed diverse groups of spectators in the common language of national unity. Continuity and tradition were resounding themes of these celebrations, but so too was the notion of historical progress; holiday orations often emphasized the nation's westward expansion, material prosperity, and technological innovation as evidence of a manifest destiny. In this context, and especially in the form of holiday orations, history was presented not only as a chronicle of peak times and deeds of great leaders, but also as a means of encouraging listeners to imagine themselves as part of a larger community held together by a unique set of characteristics and moral virtues – virtues exemplified by honored ancestors and Founding Fathers who stood as moral guides for the present.<sup>5</sup>

But despite organizers' attempts to vest these historical celebrations with a single, unified meaning, their efforts largely failed to contain the sprawl of vernacular appropriations. As the historian David Glassberg has shown, close examination of these events reveals that while public officials may have viewed holidays and commemorations as opportunities to demonstrate civic unity, local residents more often saw them “as

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<sup>5</sup> David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 9-14; Kammen, 134-145; Bodnar, 28-30.

opportunities to display their particular group identities and cultural preferences.”<sup>6</sup> In many cities, for example, unions and working-class associations often supplemented the official, patriotic rhetoric of holiday celebration with their own formulations of public memory supporting notions of equal rights, economic justice, and class solidarity. Immigrant groups, meanwhile, appropriated public ceremonies to celebrate their own history and heroes. During the 1882 bicentennial of William Penn’s arrival in Philadelphia, for example, Italian Americans substituted the colonial founder with a statue of Christopher Columbus on their parade float.<sup>7</sup> Integration of African Americans into a national consciousness, meanwhile, was opposed by many whites in the North and South, and so they organized their own commemorative activities centered on emancipation – Freedom Days and Juneteeth celebrations – that helped to re-tell and redefine the African American experience in the United States, though these were not without controversy both among whites and within black communities.<sup>8</sup>

It was the lingering animosity between North and South that presented some of the most persistent challenges to the emerging culture of official, national memory, however. While Northern victory on the battlefield had accomplished political and territorial reunion, as Caroline Janney has pointed out, the more subjective achievement of reconciliation proved more elusive. Though regular Blue-Grey reunions of former foes were much ballyhooed for their spirit of fraternal camaraderie, such commemorative occasions were exceptions. Most Americans would not forget the war, and were acutely aware of the role of memorials, commemorations, reunions, and historical texts would

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<sup>6</sup> Glassberg, 21.

<sup>7</sup> Bodnar, 31-33; Glassberg, 21-23.

<sup>8</sup> Mitch Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom: Memory and Meaning in African American Emancipation Celebrations, 1808-1915* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003).

play in defining the war and the purposes for which it was fought.<sup>9</sup> For former Confederates struggling to come to grips with their defeat on the battlefield, the twilight of the Old South, and the impositions of Reconstruction, the memory of the war as a honorable Lost Cause, in which southern soldiers had fought and died bravely for their homes and families against overwhelming odds – and as some maintained, for constitutional rights, and not for the preservation of slavery – justified their sacrifice and suffering and served as a source of pride. In this tradition of the Lost Cause, southerners elaborated their own pantheon of heroes, their own memorials, institutions, and holidays in reverence for a distinct southern identity, while remaining lukewarm to expressions of national memory.<sup>10</sup>

Amid the fragmented and contentious social landscape of the late-nineteenth century, elite groups fretted that continuing sectional, ethnic, and class conflict, coupled with the rapid pace of economic expansion and the commercialization of culture threatened to undermine civic order. Indeed, within the space of a few decades, what had once been a predominantly agrarian society of “island communities,” as the historian Robert Wiebe called them, was being transformed into a highly mobile urban-industrial nation, in which community ties were eclipsed by more centralized and impersonal forms of authority.<sup>11</sup> To forestall a sense of crisis, self-appointed guardians of tradition (or at least predominantly Anglo-Saxon interpretations of tradition) established patriotic and heritage societies dedicated to maintaining proper respect for history – especially among

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<sup>9</sup> Caroline E. Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Janney, 133-159; David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2001), 255-299; Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan (Eds.), *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), xiii.



the millions of newcomers arriving on American shores. Between the 1860s and 1890s, scores of new local historical societies were established, as were heritage societies like the Grand Army of the Republic (1866), the Sons of the American Revolution (1889), the Daughters of the American Revolution (1890), and the Society of Colonial Dames (1891), which would often choreograph extravagant historical pageants for commemorative observances.<sup>12</sup> During the spiritual crisis of the Gilded Age, as Michael Kammen wrote, “history in general became the core of civil religion ... and national history in particular became the means used to transform un-American identities into those of compliant citizens with shared values.”<sup>13</sup>

In a society increasingly conscious of its disconnection from traditional communities and folkways, the act of interpreting and preserving the past took on a new significance. Where earlier forms of memory were proving inadequate to the ruptures fracturing modern industrial life, history, as a formal discipline of knowledge, was beginning to emerge as an alternate means of engaging with the past. As the literary historian Richard Terdiman has observed, in the nineteenth century, history became “the discipline of memory,” systematizing the study of the past and thereby uncovering “the crisis that disconnection with the past inevitably entailed.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, in Europe, it had been a preoccupation of the greatest practitioners of the age – Michelet, Ranke, Tocqueville, and Burkhardt, among others – to provide some sense of continuity between

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<sup>12</sup> David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 30-40; Kammen, 228-253.

<sup>13</sup> Kammen, 12.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Terdiman, *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 31. On modernity and the disappearance of cultures of memory, see also Pierre Nora, “From ‘Lieux de memoire’ to ‘Realms of Memory,’” in *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, Vol. 1, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 1-20.

present and past.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, in the United States, where the first full flowering of realist historiography had followed closely on the continental example, the works of the romantic historians Bancroft, Motley, Prescott, and Parkman, perceived in history distinct patterns from which moral truths could be deduced.<sup>16</sup> For a growing middle-class readership, meanwhile, the historical works of established literary craftsmen like George Lippard, William Cullen Bryant, and John Clark Ridpath offered more accessible accounts of national history (and lavishly bound for home display) that privileged vivid storytelling and patriotic themes, along with a concern with accuracy and verifiable fact.<sup>17</sup>

### *Broadcasting and the Nation*

The emergence of electronic forms of communication in the nineteenth century may have seemed to exacerbate this crisis of memory. Indeed, as George Lipsitz has observed in his discussion of memory and popular culture, though the development of the telegraph – and later the telephone and wireless telegraphy – as a form of simultaneous, point-to-point communication may have reduced barriers of time and space, its predominantly commercial orientation favored the transmission of discrete messages and isolated facts that “did little to convey context or continuity.” In a complex and

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<sup>15</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 135-141. For Ranke’s influence in the U.S. especially, see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 21-31.

<sup>16</sup> Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 196.

<sup>17</sup> For a detailed discussion of popular histories and print culture in the nineteenth century, see Gregory M. Pfitzer, *Popular History and the Literary Marketplace, 1840-1920* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008). For more on domestic display of books in the nineteenth century, see Louise Stevenson, “Homes, Books, and Reading,” in *A History of the Book in America: The Industrial Book, 1840-1880*, ed. Scott E. Casper, et. al. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007): 319-331.

expanding society, direct communication between centralized institutions and distant stations had become essential to the functions of business, government, and military operations; and the communication technologies that had been developed to serve these needs tended to be “geared toward commerce and change” rather than the preservation of tradition or cultural memory.<sup>18</sup>

After the turn of the century, however, experimentations with radio broadcasting would be directed specifically towards transmitting more semantically complex messages – like music, lectures, or news reports – to a general audience. Like the earlier forms of point-to-point communication, broadcasting’s one-to-many scheme had been developed, especially in its commercial phase, according to the perceived needs of an expanding, industrial society. The dispersal of populations across the vast territories of the American west, the simultaneous clustering of working- and middle-class families in and around urban cores, the increased material prosperity of these families and their associated gain of leisure time, and the mass production of consumer technologies, were all parts of the social context in which broadcasting emerged. Its specific contribution to these conditions, as the cultural critic Raymond Williams has observed, was to provide (or seem to provide) “a form of unified social intake” of news, information, and entertainment to a diverse and decentralized population.<sup>19</sup>

In its beginnings, however, broadcasting was a much more heterogeneous practice. At first the domain of experimenters and amateur enthusiasts presenting limited programs of recorded and live music, lectures, poetry readings, and other light fare, by

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<sup>18</sup> George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 6.

<sup>19</sup> Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Routledge, 2003), 21.

the early 1920s, broadcasts from a handful of corporate-owned stations like Pittsburgh's KDKA (owned by Westinghouse) and Detroit's WWJ (a joint venture of The Radio News and Music Company and the *Detroit News*), fired the public imagination and lured hundreds of new players into the ether – some for publicity, some for business, others just for fun. In 1922 alone, an estimated 600 stations went on the air, though many quickly folded.<sup>20</sup> During the boom years between 1922 and 1925, meanwhile, an estimated 4.1 million receivers were manufactured for the domestic market, and by 1930, nearly half of all American homes had a radio.<sup>21</sup> Those seeking to address this burgeoning audience did so for a variety of reasons and under varying assumptions of what radio broadcasting was and how it might be used: For electronics manufacturers like Westinghouse, RCA, and GE, maintaining a radio station with a regular programming schedule became a way to boost receiver sales; for newspapers, department stores, and small businesses, it was a means of publicity; for churches, colleges, unions, and other non-profits, an electronic mode of evangelism. Executives at AT&T, meanwhile, conceived of radio broadcasting as an extension of telephony. In 1922, the company established station WBAY in New York as a “phone booth of the air,” at which customers – businesses, advertisers, or the general public – could pay a “toll” and broadcast any message they wished.<sup>22</sup>

Even beyond these differing conceptions and practices of broadcasting, in the 1920s, the ether was a chaotic space. Under the Radio Act of 1912, the federal government had mandated that all radio stations be licensed by the Secretary of

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<sup>20</sup> Christopher H. Sterling and John Michael Kittross, *Stay Tuned: A History of American Broadcasting*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002), 69.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 74, 862.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 336. See also Erik Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel: A History of Broadcasting in the United States*, Vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 105-114, 123, 138.

Commerce but gave that office no power to refuse a license or otherwise regulate the airwaves. As popular interest in radio grew and the number of stations multiplied, the result had been a confusion of interference from overlapping signals, faint or distant transmissions from low power stations, interruptions by wavelength interlopers, fly-by-night operators with irregular schedules, and ever-present static.<sup>23</sup> Individual broadcasters, meanwhile, used radio for divergent and conflicting purposes relevant to local, ethnic, and communal concerns. As in the contemporary culture more broadly, as the historian Susan Douglas has explained, 1920s radio was riven with opposing tendencies: “between corporate control and anticonsumerism, between the desire for order and the desire for freedom, between the safety of cultural uniformity and the titillation of subcultural rebellion and insolence.”<sup>24</sup>

Yet those looking beyond the discord of the present perceived radio’s future potential to unite untold millions of listeners across the land into a national audience. In an article for *Collier’s* titled “Radio Dreams that Can Come True” (1922), one writer predicted that, with its capacity for instant and simultaneous communication, the “miracle” of radio would one day “do more than any other agency in spreading mutual understanding to all sections of the country, unifying our thoughts, ideals, and purposes, making us a strong and well-knit people.” Isolated farmers on their vast acreages, loggers in the woods, and rural communities would all be the beneficiaries of music and culture that could be received as clearly in the countryside as they could in the cities. Two years later, a *Century Magazine* writer offered a similar vision, proclaiming that radio “would

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<sup>23</sup> Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel*, 172-188; Stirling and Kittross, 97-98. For an oral history of listening during this period, see Ray Barfield, *Listening to Radio, 1920-1950* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996), 3-14, 59-205 *passim*.

<sup>24</sup> Susan Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (New York: Times Books, 1999), 62.

do much to create a sense of national solidarity in all parts of the country, and particularly in remote settlements and on the farm.” Reflecting on “Radio’s Social Destiny” in an article for *Forum* magazine, meanwhile, the science writer Waldemar Kaempffert explained that, prior to broadcasting, any sense of American nationhood had necessarily been an abstract one. But radio now offered a remedy: “If these little towns and villages so remote from one another, so nationally related and yet physically so unrelated, could be made to acquire a sense of intimacy, if they could be brought into direct contact with one another!” Kaempffert effused. “This is exactly what radio is bringing about ... it is achieving the task of making us feel together, think together, live together.”<sup>25</sup>

Desire for this kind of national connectivity was rooted in the intense disruptions of the late nineteenth century – with the accelerating processes of industrialization, urbanization, and immigration which intellectuals, elites, and ordinary Americans alike had associated with the disintegration of the established cultural and moral order. Anxieties about the alienating effects of modernity and the fracturing of the American polity along ethnic, social, and geographic lines percolated throughout public culture at the turn of the century. By the 1920s, as the historian Warren Susman has pointed out, Americans had become distinctly aware that they were caught between two distinct eras of their civilization’s development, and there was much concern about the impacts such dramatic changes would have on a society whose institutions had developed in an earlier age.<sup>26</sup> Many believed that new communications technologies like the telegraph, telephone, and later, radio, might serve as a palliative, connecting a decentralized,

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<sup>25</sup> Stanley Frost, “Radio Dreams that Can Come True,” *Collier’s*, June 10, 1922, 18; Bruce Bliven, “How Radio is Remaking Our World” *The Century Magazine*, June 1924, 124; Waldemar Kaempffert, “The Social Destiny of Radio,” *Forum*, June 1924, 771-772.

<sup>26</sup> Warren I. Susman, *Culture and Commitment, 1929-1945* (New York George Braziller, 1973), 4.

ethnically, and socially diverse people to each other and contribute to the reemergence of a consensus culture. Thus, some of the very same anxieties that lay behind the emergence of heritage societies, patriotic organizations, and colonial revivalism at the turn of the century had also informed utopian hopes for radio.<sup>27</sup>

Public fascination with radio as a conduit to an imagined, ethereal community of radio listeners, meanwhile, had convinced some in the industry that the medium's future was national. As early as June 1922, David Sarnoff, then general manager of the Radio Corporation of America (RCA), had written to his superiors outlining a plan for a national broadcasting service, but nothing had come of it.<sup>28</sup> Eventually, however, after the initial novelty of radio had worn off, broadcasters became aware of listeners' preferences for professionally produced content and top-flight talent. Uniform and simultaneous transmissions from a centrally managed source became a cost-saving measure. As Susan Smulyan has shown, listeners throughout the country were already conceiving of themselves as a national audience, and there was a widespread assumption that radio would inevitably follow the pattern of other centrally managed institutions like railroad and telephone and telegraph networks established in the nineteenth century. Network broadcasting service, therefore, "was not imposed on ordinary people by the radio industry," but rather "gave listeners a chance to repeat and intensify an experience they had already enjoyed."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> See Daniel J. Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 91-121; and Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920-1934* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 31-32.

<sup>28</sup> David Sarnoff to E.W. Rice, June 17, 1922, in *Looking Ahead: The Papers of David Sarnoff* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 41-44.

<sup>29</sup> Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920-1934* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian University Press, 1994), 30.

The age of network broadcasting began with the launch of the RCA-GE-Westinghouse-backed National Broadcasting Company (NBC) in the fall of 1926, which was followed shortly after by the debut of Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS). Their growth was dramatic. Where NBC and CBS could count 44 affiliates during their first year (or 6 percent of the total number of stations nationwide), fully one quarter of all operating stations (a total of 618) were affiliated with one of the two networks four years later. By the end of the decade, the proportion shot up to over a half.<sup>30</sup> As media researcher Robert McChesney has pointed out, however, these statistics alone actually understate the extent of network domination during this period. When on-air hours and transmitter power are factored in, “NBC and CBS accounted for nearly 70 percent of American broadcasting by 1931.”<sup>31</sup> Advertising revenues to commercial networks grew apace, signaling a growing industry, jumping from \$3.8 million in 1927 to \$62.6 million a decade later.<sup>32</sup> But again, these statistics can understate the reality of advertising influence in radio at this time. According to a 1931 trade magazine estimate, on average, fifteen minutes of every hour of commercial broadcasting that year had been devoted to sales messages.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, by the early 1930s, “virtually all sponsored network programs were developed and produced by advertising agencies.”<sup>34</sup>

Broadcasting chains cultivated new kinds of radio listening that plastered over regional distinctions, constructing its audience as a homogeneous whole.<sup>35</sup> While there

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<sup>30</sup> Sterling and Kittross, *Stay Tuned*, 830-31.

<sup>31</sup> Robert W. McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy: The Battle for the Control of U.S. Broadcasting, 1928-1935* (New York: Oxford University Press), 29.

<sup>32</sup> Sterling and Kittross, *Stay Tuned*, 838-39.

<sup>33</sup> McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy*, 30.

<sup>34</sup> Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel*, 239.

<sup>35</sup> Susan Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899-1922* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); Susan Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination, from Amos 'n' Andy and Edward R. Murrow to Wolfman Jack and Howard Stern* (New York: Times Books, 1999).



were some skeptics, particularly from the southern and western United States who grumbled about Eastern cultural hegemony, radio built upon preexisting cultural forms (vaudeville, legitimate theater, magazines, circuses, movies) and technical infrastructures (telegraph, telephone, railroad, post) familiar to most Americans. But imagining national identity through network radio also involved setting the limits of that community; of identifying who was “in” and who was “out;” of which groups might effectively be assimilated, and which were marked as “other.” As Hilmes has demonstrated, radio’s articulation of the “nation’s voice” privileged the perspectives of society’s dominant group: of middle-class whites, whose received notion of American-ness (those that looked, sounded and behaved as they did) had been challenged at the turn of the century by the arrival of millions of European immigrants, and the “Great Migration” of African Americans to northern cities. As a means of transmitting and maintaining cultural values, radio became a key site for negotiating definitions of American identity, a “machine for the circulation of narratives and representations that rehearse and justify the structures of order underlying national identity.” To borrow from contemporary phraseology, radio could become a melting pot of the air, whose representational politics might moderate cultural tensions; on the one hand by encouraging the assimilation of new European immigrants through shows like *Rise of the Goldbergs*, and on the other, by emphasizing the difference of blacks and whites in shows like *Amos ‘n’ Andy*.<sup>36</sup>

Demand for the kind of connectivity offered by network programming became especially apparent between 1926 and 1933, when receiver ownership among American families climbed from just 16 to over 60 percent. Though these adoption rates were

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<sup>36</sup> Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

unevenly distributed across ethnic, class, and regional lines (with urban whites generally among the earliest adopters, and rural and African-American families among the last<sup>37</sup>), radio had come to be heralded as a fundamentally democratic technology. Not only could cheap sets be enjoyed by rich and poor, black and white, office worker and farmhand alike, but network radio's simultaneous and universal mode of address had created a new social space in which listeners in private homes, backyards, barbershops, schools, offices, saloons, and church basements could imagine themselves as part of a larger whole; an invisible, but distinctly American audience. This sense of aural unity, of listening together as a mass democratic public was emphasized – or at least it is best remembered – in President Roosevelt's highly-publicized series of Fireside Chats between 1933 and 1934, which “conflated radio listening with national identity,” according to Jason Loviglio, “inviting listeners to participate in the invention of a new public realm of radio reception from the comfort of their own homes.” Simultaneously a public and private experience, listening to radio became a new “ritual of national identity,” which suggested, or at least seemed to suggest, a new space for participatory democracy.<sup>38</sup>

### *Radio and Public Culture*

Increasing corporate domination of the airwaves in the late 1920s and early 1930s was not universally accepted, however. Alarmed by the growing commercialization of the airwaves, a chorus of radio reformers – educators, intellectuals, religious groups, labor organizations, and other nonprofits – began to lobby Congress for allocations that

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<sup>37</sup> Steve Craig, “How America Adopted Radio: Demographic Differences in Set Ownership Reported in the 1930-1950 U.S. Censuses,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 48, no. 2 (2004): 179-195.

<sup>38</sup> Jason Loviglio, *Radio's Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting and Mass-Mediated Democracy* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 9, xv.

would reserve a significant portion of the electromagnetic spectrum for noncommercial and educational use. Pointing to a provision in the charter of the newly created Federal Radio Commission (FRC) that had empowered the agency to regulate the ether in accordance with “public interest, convenience, or necessity” (though this was only vaguely defined by the law), the reformers argued that, in large part, commercial broadcasting had failed to meet the criteria.<sup>39</sup> The issues were twofold: the first, was that advertiser-supported broadcasting tended to favor certain types of programming – sports, variety, popular music, and other light fare judged acceptable to a mass audience – that left little room in station schedules for educational or community-oriented material thought to be crucial to the functioning of democratic society; second, that the commercial system itself left little room for nonprofit operations, as its supporters – the networks, independent commercial broadcasters, and their allies (and to a large extent the FRC itself) – seemed at times to prefer that the entirety of the spectrum be turned over to private enterprise for exploitation. The “public interest,” the reformers maintained, would instead be best served by ensuring access for a broad group of operators.

Commercial broadcasters, meanwhile, balked at any suggestion of spectrum reservations. Such government intervention, they argued, would inevitably interfere with established broadcast operations. Besides, broadcasting in the “public interest,” as they understood that criterion, involved providing the best quality service to the largest possible audience. Leveraging corporate sponsorship and economies of scale, commercial broadcasters – and especially the industry-backed networks – were uniquely equipped to provide such a service on a consistent basis. In their conception, the “American System

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<sup>39</sup> *An Act for the Regulation of Radio Communications, and for Other Purposes*, Public Law 632, U.S. Statutes at Large 44 (1925), 1162-1175.

of Broadcasting,” as it was benignly termed, would effectively keep the state out of broadcasting while market competition would encourage the best quality programming and prevent monopolization. The FRC, meanwhile, had explicitly supported the view that large commercial broadcasters were best positioned to serve the public interest through superior technical capability, full-time operation, and by appeal to a general audience.<sup>40</sup>

This crisis of control reached denouement in late 1934 as Congress deliberated over a package of legislation that would determine the future of American broadcasting. The proposed Wagner-Hatfield amendment to the Communications Act of 1934 would have set aside 25% of spectrum allocations specifically for noncommercial use. Owing to immense opposition from the industry and their congressional allies, the amendment was eventually defeated in the Senate. As a compromise, however, the newly formed Federal Communications Commission (FCC) had agreed to hold hearings on reservations the following fall. Industry representatives argued before the broadcasting committee of the FCC that they were more than willing to serve educational and civic needs, and that setting aside frequencies would be unnecessarily intrusive and in restraint of trade. CBS president William S. Paley, for example, remonstrated against reservation proposals, testifying that roughly two-thirds of his network’s programming over the previous year had already been devoted to sustaining features of an educational or religious character. “I am personally loath to believe,” he told the committee, “that any legislative mandate could assist in the attainment of goals that we are already working toward

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<sup>40</sup> The debate over the shape of U.S. broadcasting, the Radio Act of 1927, and the Communications Act of 1934 is discussed extensively in Robert W. McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy: The Battle for Control of U.S. Broadcasting, 1928-1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); and in Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media*, 347-361.

wholeheartedly.”<sup>41</sup> As a result of lockstep opposition from commercial broadcasters like Paley and their allies, the FCC recommended to Congress in January 1935 that no reservations be made.

As radio historian David Goodman has convincingly argued, however, the fate of American broadcasting was not quite sealed after passage of the 1934 Act. Haunted by the prospect of new rounds of reform and regulation, many in the industry were anxious to present themselves as responsible stewards of the public airwaves. While much of this posturing involved harping on the capacities of the large commercial networks, it also involved cultivating what Goodman calls a “civic ambition,” which sought to demonstrate that commercial broadcasting could enlighten as well as entertain – that commercial radio could elevate public taste and enhance participatory democracy. The result was a slate of cultural programs, musical appreciation hours, and public forums designed to encourage active and engaged listenership of the kind that was commensurate with self-government.<sup>42</sup> The very possibility that these programs would reach a substantial national audience via network wires was claimed as a distinctive asset of the American System of Broadcasting. In an address to the first meeting of the National Conference on Educational Broadcasting at the University of Chicago in 1936 (some of whose participants had lobbied Congress for reservations two years earlier), David Sarnoff extolled this virtue of network broadcasting – and his own network’s programming – by showcasing NBC sustaining programs like *American Education Forum*, *University of Chicago Round Table*, and *America’s Town Meeting of the Air*,

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<sup>41</sup> “W.S. Paley Against ‘Forced’ Programs,” *New York Times*, October 18, 1934, 26.

<sup>42</sup> David Goodman, *Radio’s Civic Ambition: American Broadcasting and Democracy in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

arguing that each demonstrated the American System's ability to "bring drama, literature, science, news, history and political education to vast millions of listeners."<sup>43</sup>

With such outreach on behalf of network leaders, educators and democratic reformers became invested in radio's civic paradigm and engaged themselves in imagining ways in which this mass audience of otherwise passive listeners might be transformed into an active and engaged public of fellow citizens. Informed in part by the work of progressive educator John Dewey, advocates for democratic radio conceptualized the technology's key function to be educational in nature, a means of socializing a vast listenership into pluralist civic values of open-mindedness, active listenership, and the calm, rational debate of competing ideas.<sup>44</sup> As Goodman notes, the forum discussion program, a form of which aired on virtually every network in the 1930s, was an exemplar of such ideas. Drawing upon the earlier genre of community forums – which had gained momentum during the Progressive-era as a means of equipping newly arrived immigrants with the skills required for self-government<sup>45</sup> – programs like NBC's *The University of Chicago Round Table* and *America's Town Meeting of the Air*, Mutual's *American Forum of the Air* provided venues in which Americans could not only think of themselves as connected to the larger national community, but could also shape

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<sup>43</sup> David Sarnoff "Broadcasting in the American Democracy," in *Educational Broadcasting: Proceedings of the First National Conference on Educational Broadcasting*, ed. C.S. Marsh (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1936), 146-155.

<sup>44</sup> Goodman, *Radio's Civic Ambition*, pp. 181-215; Goodman discusses at some length Deweyian ideas and their personal influence on education reformers.

<sup>45</sup> On this phenomenon, see Kevin Mattson, *Creating a Democratic Public: The Struggle for Urban Participatory Democracy during the Progressive Era* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998).

that community through the organization of discussion groups and letter writing. Radio, as one observer noted in the mid-1930s, was swiftly becoming an American acropolis.<sup>46</sup>

There was also a growing interest in descriptive nonfiction as a cultural expression during the 1930s. During the Depression, Americans had become skeptical of optimistic bromides from their press and political leaders, became dissatisfied with canned ideologies, and sought the facts of contemporary social conditions themselves – a cult of experience that merged with the growing desire to chart an “American Way.” Here, as Susman says, what was not important was a new era of nationalism, but “rather the more complex effort to seek and to define America as a culture and to create the patterns of a way of life worth understanding.”<sup>47</sup> This produced a drive to document all aspects of the history, life, and values of the American people. Too much propaganda and misinformation by entrenched interests made Americans suspicious. Propaganda after all had been blamed for U.S. involvement in the First World War, and the subsequent activities of George Creel’s Committee on Public Information, which had been accused of embellishing truths, had made Americans wary of government media production.<sup>48</sup> Immediate and intimate, radio, according to historian William Stott, was such an effective medium for documentaries because it “was the ideal medium for putting the audience in another man’s shoes.”<sup>49</sup>

A number of these pioneering attempts at documenting real life for radio broadcast productions were produced by Columbia. *We, the People* (NBC, 1936; CBS,

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<sup>46</sup> Merrill Denison, *The Educational Program: A Discussion of Facts and Techniques in Educational Broadcasting* (New York: The Radio Institute of the Audible Arts, 1935).

<sup>47</sup> Susman, *The Culture of the Thirties*, 157. It is also significant that in the 1930s we get the first sustained attempt at public opinion polling.

<sup>48</sup> This is one of the reasons why documentary projects became critical tools of the New Deal.

<sup>49</sup> William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 90.

1937-1945) dramatized news stories with strong human-interest components, centering on personal conflict and often relying on the statements of persons actually involved in the story. *Human Adventure* (1939) sponsored by the University of Chicago dramatized a number of subjects of educational and news interest and relied greatly on narration and reenactment to present its subject matter. *Democracy in Action* (CBS, 1939) described the government at work. *Columbia Workshop* (CBS, 1936-1943; 1946-47) presented dramatic and documentary pieces. NBC, meanwhile, presented *The World is Yours* (NBC, 1936-40), sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution, *Roof Over America*, and *Municipal Government*.<sup>50</sup>

### *History on the Dial*

Commercial radio's civic ambition also provided the intellectual and institutional context for the production of historical dramatizations.<sup>51</sup> While each of these series brought their own agendas and epistemological assumptions to their historical presentations – their own ideas about how to construct a “usable past” – their well-researched reconstructions reflected the growing interest in descriptive nonfiction as a

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<sup>50</sup> There has yet to be a comprehensive study of pre-war radio documentaries. References to the information above may be found in: A. William Bluem, *Documentary in American Television: Form, Function, Method* (New York: Hastings House, 1965), 60-65; Raymond Lee Carroll, “Factual Television in America: An Analysis of Network Television Documentary Programs, 1948-1975” (PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1978), 69-73; Matthew C. Erlich, *Radio Utopia: Postwar Audio Documentary in the Public Interest* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 13-17; A comprehensive index of radio programs may also be found in Harrison B. Summers, *A Thirty-Year History of Programs Carried on National Radio Networks in the United States, 1926-1956* (New York: Arno Press, 1971).

<sup>51</sup> A full accounting of history on radio in the 1920s, '30s, and '40s is outside the scope of this chapter. Apart from the four series mentioned here, others (not counting historical discussions on general instructional programs and “schools of the air”) included *Great Moments in History* (NBC, 1927-28; 1932-33); *Hands of History* (NBC, 1928-29); *Durant Heroes of the World* (NBC, 1929-30); *Stones of History* (NBC, 1934-35); *Men of Destiny* (Mutual, 1936-37); *Epic of America* (Mutual, 1937-38); *The Story Behind the Headlines* (NBC, 1938-39); *Mystery History Quiz* (Mutual, 1939-40); and *Freedom's People* (NBC, 1941-42). Source: Harrison B. Summers, *A Thirty-Year History of Programs Carried on National Radio Networks in the United States, 1926-1956* (New York: Arno Press, 1971).



form of cultural expression in the late 1930s. But these series also demonstrated the how radio was used to create structured representations of race, ethnicity, class and gender in ways that moderated tensions and promoted cultural homogeneity. To examine how radio producers, directors, and writers utilized the historical past to engage with the anxieties and crises of the 1930s, it's worth examining two series in particular: First, the long-running Du Pont-sponsored series *Cavalcade of America*, and the government-sponsored limited series *Americans All, Immigrants All*.

*Cavalcade of America* (CBS, 1935-39; NBC, 1939-53)

In a series of Senate investigations of the munitions industry chaired by North Dakota Senator Gerald P. Nye in 1935, it was revealed that the E. I. Du Pont corporation had profited enormously from the sale of gunpowder during World War I, driving hard bargains first with the Allies and later with the U.S. government. Committee hearings had also determined that the company had secured public funding for factory expansion during the war but had kept most of the profits within the Du Pont family, even as many of their employees had fallen ill – or died – from working with hazardous chemicals. Even more troubling, however, was the revelation that the Du Pont family had used its money and connections with politicians to push the United States closer to war. As a result of the Nye Committee hearings, the Du Pont corporation had earned a public reputation as a “merchant of death.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Erik Christiansen, *Channeling the Past: Politicizing History in Postwar America* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2013), 56-57; Erik Barnouw, *Media Marathon: A Twentieth Century Memoir* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 75. See also H. C. Englebrecht & Frank C. Hanighen, *Merchants of Death: A Study of the International Armament Industry* (Garden City, NY: The Garden City Publishing Co., Inc., 1934); George Seldes, *Iron, Blood, and Profits: An Exposure of the World-Wide Munitions Racket* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1934); “Arms and the Men,” *Fortune* 9 (March 1934), 52-57, 113-126.

Realizing that their reputation needed burnishing, Du Pont, like many of the country's large firms in response to the general anti-business climate of the Great Depression, decided to develop a public relations campaign.<sup>53</sup> It was Bruce Barton, founding partner of advertising firm Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn (BBD&O) who recommended the company produce a series of radio programs that would link the embattled company to an idealized representation of American history. According to long-serving series historical director Dixon Ryan Fox, *Cavalcade of America* had been “originally conceived and steadily developed in patriotic faith, informed by understanding and responsible research, to remind us of the purposes and motives on which our fathers and mothers based and built this nation.”<sup>54</sup> Erik Barnouw, who had worked for BBD&O as a script supervisor for *Cavalcade* in the late 1940s, recalled in his memoir years later, the basis for the strategy was that “the name of Du Pont would henceforth be identified – especially for youthful audiences – with explorations, inventions, and humanitarian progress,” rather than rapacious capitalism. Meanwhile, Du Pont promotions aired within the broadcasts – usually at the top or the bottom of the presentation – would “remind listeners of the company’s contributions” to American society, especially through the new company slogan that was rolled out specifically for the *Cavalcade* series: *Better things through better living through chemistry*.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> See William L Bird, Jr., *‘Better Living’: Advertising, Media, and the New Vocabulary of Business Leadership, 1935-1955* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 66-67; Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, “Creating a Favorable Business Climate: Corporations and Radio Broadcasting, 1934 to 1954,” *The Business History Review* 73, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 221-255.

<sup>54</sup> Dixon Ryan Fox, Foreword to *The Cavalcade of America* (Springfield, MA: Milton Bradley Company, 1938), viii.

<sup>55</sup> Erik Barnouw, *Media Marathon: A Twentieth-Century Memoir* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 75. A large collection of the original programs can be found at the Internet Archive: [https://archive.org/details/OTRR\\_Cavalcade\\_of\\_America\\_Singles](https://archive.org/details/OTRR_Cavalcade_of_America_Singles).

Du Pont executives kept a close eye on the series and an active involvement with its production. As Barnouw remembered, during his tenure, Du Pont advertising director William A. Hart was a fixture at creative meetings and rehearsals, travelling up to New York from company headquarters in Wilmington, Delaware each week to supervise the operations. “Much time was spent anticipating Hart’s objections to topics, plots, or script details,” Barnouw recalled, adding that during this process “the epithet ‘that bastard’ was used regularly.”<sup>56</sup> In particular, Hart and his superiors at Du Pont were keen to avoid any hint of warfare or violence, which might call to listeners’ minds awkward associations between DuPont and the munitions industry. “A range of taboos came into play” when discussing topics and writing scripts, Barnouw remembered, “no shot could be fired; even the sound of an explosion was for many years taboo.” Similarly, and according to the company’s anti-New Deal stance, any mention of labor, unions, or the Tennessee Valley Authority were strictly off-limits. Race, too, was a subject thought best to be avoided, and so the series did not focus on an African American leader until 1948 – thirteen years after it debuted.<sup>57</sup>

All of these restrictions, taboos, and avoidances, Barnouw noted, were consistent with Du Pont’s romanticized image of American history: “History was not looked on as a probing of problems, but as a celebration. It dealt with heroes.” It also meant that, for all intents and purposes, that writers like Barnouw should assume “that American history stopped around 1880, except for science and the advancement of women.” Any closer to the present might adherently touch on controversial subjects.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Barnouw, *Media Marathon*, 75.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 75-77.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 77, 76.

Indeed, many of the series episodes were devoted to the history of women's emancipation, women's suffrage, and various contributions of women to American arts, science, politics, education, and business. The series' seventh episode, titled "Woman's Emancipation," for example, presented a series of historical vignettes, beginning with a concise explanation of women's legal subordination to their husbands in the course of a dialogue between nineteenth century suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton (played by film and stage actor Fay Bainter) and her husband Henry. As Henry (not Elizabeth herself – one wonders why the activist does not explain this herself) explains, any personal property she considers her own is legally owned by her father or husband and could be sold off without consulting her. The segment is followed by several more scenes that present the suffrage movement as a steady march of momentous events: the arrest of Susan B. Anthony (played again by Bainter), the Women's Suffrage Procession in Washington, D.C. in 1913, and finally the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1918. This was all history. But in the present, when noting the contributions of women to American society, the announcer asks listeners to think of how women function as the "purchasing agents" of the household. As Barnouw noted, meanwhile, between BBD&O and Du Pont, "the improved lot of women was looked on mainly as an achievement of science."<sup>59</sup>

Before working on the show, Barnouw claims that he hadn't realized that the show was so heavily tilted towards maintaining the Du Pont company image. It was only after that "I could now see that the series added up to an extremely distorted and

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<sup>59</sup> Du Pont, "Woman's Emancipation," November 13, 1935, in *Cavalcade of America*, accessed January 13, 2019, [https://archive.org/details/OTRR\\_Cavalcade\\_of\\_America\\_Singles/CALV\\_351113\\_006\\_Womans\\_Emancipation.mp3](https://archive.org/details/OTRR_Cavalcade_of_America_Singles/CALV_351113_006_Womans_Emancipation.mp3); Barnouw, *Media Marathon*, 76.

misleading panorama of American history.” He wondered whether it was ethical. But, “the series kept winning prizes. And liberal, idealistic writers continued to accept its commissions, usually with alacrity.” The “roster of writers seemed to me to epitomize the high status it had won,” he reported.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, as Christiansen has noted, the series was a boon to professional educators who had been waiting for the networks to produce quality educational programming, part of their civic mission. While the show was on radio and later on television he writes, “Educators, historians, and community leaders looked to Du Pont to provide what they felt lacking – first on radio, later on television: the educational programming that had largely failed to flow forth as expected from these new technologies.”<sup>61</sup>

*Americans All, Immigrants All* (CBS, 1938-39)

A cooperative production of the U.S. Office of Education, the Works Progress Administration, and the CBS network, *Americans All, Immigrants All* presented a series of twenty-six, half-hour radio programs about the contributions of immigrant groups to American society throughout the country’s history. Airing Sunday afternoons on more than 100 CBS affiliates nationwide, the program combined musical arrangements with historical vignettes and dramatizations in a way that proved enormously popular – by one count, the show received over 80,000 letters of congratulations and approval by the end of its six-month run.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Erik Barnouw, *Media Marathon: A Twentieth-Century Memoir* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 76-77-78.

<sup>61</sup> Erik Christiansen, *Channeling the Past: Politicizing History in Postwar America* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press), 53.

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Dan Shiffman, “A Standard for the Wise and Honest: The ‘Americans All...Immigrants All’ Radio Broadcasts,” *Studies in Popular Culture* 19, no. 1 (October 1996), 99.

Designed to “promote a more appreciative understanding of our growing American culture” through focus on the nation’s multi-ethnic, multi-racial constituency, according to a companion publication circulated by the Office of Education, the series presented a usable past that closely aligned with New Deal assumptions about the role of social cooperation in achieving economic recovery, ensuring the health of American democracy, and in confronting the threat of totalitarianism from abroad.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, the title of the series had been adapted from comments that President Roosevelt had made to the Daughters of the American Revolution, in which the president had enjoined the group to “remember always that all of us, and you and I especially, are descended from immigrants and revolutionists.” Like the series, it was a warning that old-stock Americans needed to be aware of the contributions of newcomers. “Nothing is ever done in this country by one group alone,” the series announcer states in several episodes. “The making of the United States goes on – today as always – by endless cooperative effort. Each group has special work to do, but whatever is brought here is changed by all those who became Americans.”<sup>64</sup>

The concept for the show was developed by the educator and activist Rachel Davis DuBois, who enlisted the help of U.S. Commissioner of Education John Studebaker. DuBois had originally designed the show as a response to radio firebrand Father Charles Coughlin’s inflammatory and racist radio demagoguery. Initially, DuBois and Studebaker approached the NBC network to help produce the show, but network

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<sup>63</sup> United States Department of The Interior Office of Education, *Americans All, Immigrants All* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1939), 2.

<sup>64</sup> Shiffman, 100; Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Remarks to the Daughters of the American Revolution.” The American Presidency Project, UC Santa Barbara. Accessed January 11, 2019. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-daughters-the-american-revolution-washington-de>; Quoted in “Uncle Sam Schoolmaster,” *Radio Guide*, December 10, 1938, 3.

education counselor James Angell had advised executives against producing the show for fear of controversy. As a result, DuBois and Studebaker approached CBS, which agreed to help co-produce the series. Gilbert Seldes, the cultural critic and newly employed head of CBS television programming, was tapped to write several of the series scripts.<sup>65</sup>

DuBois and Seldes had different philosophical visions and aims for the show, however. DuBois wanted the show to contribute to the reduction of racial and ethnic prejudice in the country, and so wanted each installment of the series to take a deep focus on the contributions of specific ethnic groups to the American experience. Seldes, on the other hand, wanted the series to take a more holistic approach that focused rather on the assimilation of immigrant groups into an American melting pot. Though philosophical differences made the show somewhat unfocused, the differences were not irreconcilable. The show went on, and as a result, some installments focused on individual groups (e.g. “Our English Heritage,” “Our Hispanic Heritage,” “The Negro in the United States,” “Jews in America”), others were dedicated to more general themes like the contributions of various ethnic groups to American industry, the immigrant experience on the western frontier, or the contributions of immigrants to American arts and crafts.<sup>66</sup>

Still, despite the professed progressive sensibilities of the producers, the series often reproduced stereotypical sounds and images of ethnic groups. In many episodes, actors portraying different ethnic identities performed exaggerated accents that sonically signified differences from accepted speech patterns – patterns that had been reinforced by national radio programs since the late 1920s.<sup>67</sup> Other stereotypes perpetuated by the

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<sup>65</sup> Barbara Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom: Radio, War, and the Politics of Race, 1938-1948*, 44.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-26.

<sup>67</sup> See Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, 18-21.

series were exemplified by an extensive catalogue of traits supposed to be natural or intrinsic to certain national groups:

*The clear thought of the French; the devotion and discipline of the German; the generous love of liberty of the Netherlander; the Anglo-Saxon's concept of the common law; the Scot's passion for private liberty; the Scandinavian's will toward the cooperative effort; the Jew's passion for destroying poverty; the quick spirit of the Italian; the mysticism of the Hindu and the Armenian; the lively social sense of the Irish; the simplicity of life of the Hispanic peoples; the elation of the Slav in liberty; the Hungarian's love for music ... all these and the sweat of their brows and the labor of their hands ... these were the elements out of which the United States became a nation.*<sup>68</sup>

Further, as the historian Barbara Savage has noted in her analysis of the series, the narrative model of immigrant groups overcoming initial hardships to achieve success in the United States did not comport with lived experiences of most immigrant groups. Rather, “it applied best to those who no longer considered themselves immigrants, those already resting under the banner of American-ness – namely, white Anglo-Saxon Protestants.”<sup>69</sup>

The episode devoted to “The Negro in the United States” met with mixed reaction among African American leaders. Some, like Roy Wilkins and George Murphy of the New York NAACP criticized the episode for dwelling inordinately on the trope of blacks as manual laborers. Others like Walter White, executive director of the NAACP thought that, even with these flaws, the show was beneficial for African Americans because it offered a dignified and therefore contrasting set of representations than what was then currently circulating on American radio. Last minute changes in song for the show ended

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<sup>68</sup> <https://www.wnyc.org/series/americans-all-immigrants-all>

<sup>69</sup> Barbara Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom: Radio, War, and the Politics of Race, 1938-1948*, 25-26, 33.



up with CBS cutting a segment on contemporary black achievements, much to dismay of those who had worked on the script.<sup>70</sup>

Both *Cavalcade of America* and *Americans All*, *Immigrants All* demonstrated that the national past could provide a rich source of narrative content for broadcast media, and that such content could be informative, entertaining, and even popular. Moreover, each series reveals patterns and themes that would carry over to historical representation on the new broadcast medium of television in the late 1940s, 1950s, and beyond. First, each series sought to provide an interpretation of national heritage to a national broadcast audience. Second, in each series, producers interpreted the past according to specific needs in the present – though these could vary from individual to individual. *Cavalcade of America* sought to link the Du Pont Corporation with a romantic and even nostalgic version of the past. *Americans All*, *Immigrants All* to promote tolerance in support of New Deal priorities.

### *The Coming Age of Television*

As television began to emerge from industrial laboratories and into the realm of commercial possibility in the late 1930s, there was much public speculation about the new medium's potential impact on American social life. The most optimistic of pronouncements quite naturally came from within the industry. Chief among these was RCA president David Sarnoff, whose company was at the forefront of television research and development (and through its subsidiary NBC, also a leader in the broadcasting

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<sup>70</sup> Barbara Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom: Radio, War, and the Politics of Race, 1938-1948*, 25-26, 39-41.

field), the advent of television heralded the “unification of the life of the nation and, at the same time, the greater development of the life of the individual.”<sup>71</sup> Inflected with the language of civic ambition and cultural uplift, Sarnoff maintained in his writings and public statements that television’s greatest contribution to democratic society would be its capacity to encourage empathy and civic discourse among distant populations. Rhapsodizing about television’s future in *Popular Mechanics*, for example, Sarnoff predicted that television’s electronic eye would provide an historic opportunity “for new education in its widest sense, for new understanding, for a new era in human relationships.”<sup>72</sup>

While some early observers remained skeptical of such rosy claims (had not radio, too, promised cultural and civic renewal before lapsing into crass commercialism?), there were others who shared in its essentially nineteenth-century correlation of technological systems and national unification.<sup>73</sup> Writing in 1945, film and radio critic Harriet Van Horne predicted that the family set of the future would become “the greatest force for world enlightenment and freedom that history has ever known. Ideas will know no boundaries, and no man shall be a stranger to any other man.” Two years later, a DuMont television executive predicted in that, in the field of education, television represented “the greatest instrument for mass dissemination of information and knowledge since the days of Guttenberg.” Likewise, the same year, FCC Chairman

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<sup>71</sup> Sarnoff quoted in *America’s First Television Tour* (New York: National Broadcasting Company, 1939), 1.

<sup>72</sup> David Sarnoff, “The Future of Television.” *Popular Mechanics*, September 1939, 322.

<sup>73</sup> For a synopsis of the skeptical attitudes among observers of television’s early progress, see James L. Baughman, “The Promise of American Television, 1929-1952,” *Prospects*, Vol. 11 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987): 119-134.

Wayne Coy declared that in the near future, “television will approach closer and closer to its mission of unifying our nation and making more perfect our democracy.”<sup>74</sup>

In practice, television didn’t always live up to such lofty expectations. Indeed, radio critic Jack Gould’s 1947 observation that television “may take the country’s cultural level down as well as up,” may have been closer to the mark.<sup>75</sup> Still, perceptions of television during the early Cold War— especially among the corporations, advertisers, government agencies, and business nonprofit groups who would be its content sponsors in the 1940s and 1950s – was that the technology could be used as a means of soft cultural power. As media scholar Anna McCarthy has argued, despite the medium’s associations with commercialism, television by the 1950s had become conceptualized by various elites as a “citizen machine” – a tool for cultivating in an expanding viewership the values of individual liberty, economic freedom, national identity, and morality essential to a liberal capitalist democracy.

Curating historical knowledge was a crucial part of this agenda. Connecting “the heroic pursuit of freedom in past centuries to the domestic and geopolitical challenges of the day,” McCarthy writes, the stories of the national past provided a repository of examples, traditions, and inspiration that could anchor Americans as they struggled to negotiate the complex issues and contradictions of the postwar world.<sup>76</sup> Re-presenting the stories of World War II, the Founding Fathers, the Civil War, or the signing of Magna

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<sup>74</sup> Harriet Van Horne, “Views Coming Up,” *Collier’s*, October 13, 1945, 28; Mortimer W. Lowei, “A Glance Ahead: The Future of Broadcasting,” in *Education on the Air: Nineteenth Yearbook of the Institute for Education by Radio* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1949), 23; “History in Television,” *New York Times*, November 18, 1947, 28; Coy quoted in James L. Baughman, “The Promise of American Television, 1929-1952,” *Prospects*, Vol. 11 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 125.

<sup>75</sup> Jack Gould, “The Paradoxical State of Television,” *New York Times Magazine*, March 30, 1947, 35.

<sup>76</sup> Anna McCarthy, *The Citizen Machine: Governing by Television in 1950s America* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 15.

Carta on television became parables imparting the values and traditions of American citizenship; a steady point of reference in a rapidly changing world.

## **Chapter Two: Crusade in Europe**

*Soldiers, Sailors, and Airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force!*

*You Are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward which we have been striving these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you... Good Luck! And let us all beseech the blessing of Almighty God upon this great and noble undertaking.*

- Dwight D. Eisenhower<sup>1</sup>

In the spring of 1949, as the *March of Time* adaptation of General Dwight D. Eisenhower's war memoir *Crusade in Europe* (1948) was being beamed into households across the U.S., the first major international crisis of the Cold War appeared to be ending peacefully. The previous summer, the Soviet Union had severed all land and water connections to West Berlin in an effort to derail Anglo-French-American plans to establish an independent and modernized West German state. With West Berlin completely surrounded by the Soviet-occupied zone and inaccessible by road, river, and rail, the Western Allies organized a massive airlift to ferry food, coal, and other provisions to the beleaguered city. Though conceived as a temporary expedient until a more permanent diplomatic solution to the crisis could be found, the Berlin Airlift quickly became a symbol of the Western democracies' commitment to the free people of Berlin, and a full demonstration of their logistical and military capabilities. By its peak in early 1949, nearly 200,000 flights had delivered 1.5 million tons of supplies to Berlin. By mid-April, it was clear that the gambit had worked, and rather than dividing the West as

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<sup>1</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, *D-Day Statement to Soldiers, Sailor[s], and Airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force*, June 6, 1944. Retrieved from <https://www.archives.gov/historical-docs/todays-doc/?dod-date=606>.

the Soviets had anticipated, the airlift had strengthened Allied resolve. The Soviet Union lifted the blockade on May 12.<sup>2</sup>

But even as the Berlin crisis ended, tensions between the “two hostile camps,” as Eisenhower had called the communist East and liberal-democratic West in his memoir the previous year, continued to mount. To counter the extension of Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe, which by this time extended from the Baltic Sea to the Adriatic, the U.S. and eleven partner nations had established the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) on April 4, 1949. In Greece, meanwhile, a violent civil war between the Western-backed nationalists and the Soviet-aligned Democratic Army of Greece had left the political future of the country in doubt. In China, the People’s Liberation Army under Mao Zedong had dealt a critical blow to the nationalist Kuomintang on April 23, capturing the seat of the central government at Nanjing. But perhaps the most ominous development of all were reports that the Soviet Union had successfully tested an atomic bomb. Inexorably, it seemed, the deterioration of relations between the former allies moved the powers closer to “another holocaust of war,” as Eisenhower had feared.<sup>3</sup>

For Americans struggling to make sense of the shifting geopolitical realities of 1949, television – then in its first fully scheduled season, but still a consumer luxury – was beginning to emerge as a source for news and information on current events. Such programming was rudimentary at first. Americans, and more importantly advertisers, seemed more interested in TV’s capacities for delivering live sports and entertainment than in its informational value. But although the television boom of the late 1940s and

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel F. Harrington, *Berlin on the Brink: The Blockade, the Airlift, and the Early Cold War* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1948), 458.

early 1950s was propelled in large part by baseball and Milton Berle, there were some that took television's role in public affairs seriously, experimenting with various forms of news reports, roundtables, and documentaries that would inform as well as entertain. In early 1948, for example, both NBC and CBS premiered their first regularly scheduled nightly newscasts, *Camel News Caravan* (NBC) and *Douglas Edwards and the News* (CBS), and ABC soon followed with its own *News and Views* program. Meanwhile Columbia had also been an innovator in the area of public affairs programming with its series *UN Casebook*, which presented panel discussions and documentary films about critical matters confronting the global body as it navigated the complex postwar geopolitical order.<sup>4</sup> By the glow of the cathode ray tube, the nation's small, but growing TV audience would learn about the global struggle against communism as it unfolded in places as far away as Berlin and Korea, and as nearby as New York City and Washington, D.C.

Among these early innovations in public affairs programming was ABC's broadcast of a 26-part documentary adaptation of Eisenhower's best-selling memoir. Produced by Twentieth Century-Fox in cooperation with Time Inc. and *The March of Time*, *Crusade in Europe* was one of the first documentary series produced specifically for the small screen and the most significant contribution of the film industry – ever suspicious of the newcomer – to television to that point. Broadcast at a time when most television programming was live, local, and very cheaply produced, *Crusade's* 8 ½ hours

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<sup>4</sup> Harry Castleman and Walter S. Podrazik, *Watching TV: Eight Decades of American Television*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2016), 34-35; Raymond L. Carroll, "Factual Television in America: Network Television Documentary Programs, 1948-1975" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin – Madison, 1978), 532-537; Gary R. Edgerton, *The Columbia History of American Television* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 140-155.

of slickly edited archival footage was hailed as a long-awaited confirmation of the medium's capacity for artistic achievement and cultural enlightenment – proof that it could deliver more than vaudeville adaptations and professional wrestling matches. Though perhaps not as high a ratings earner as network favorites like *Toast of the Town* or *Candid Camera*, *Crusade in Europe* had nevertheless scored top marks in several cities and was one the first filmed series to air in all existing TV markets.<sup>5</sup>

For viewers, the series promised a spectacle quite unlike anything else on television at the time. As Supreme Allied Commander in Europe and Military Governor of the U.S. Occupied Zone in postwar Germany, Eisenhower had recorded his unique perspective on the war and its aftermath in its book, and the *March of Time* adaptation had scrupulously sought to maintain that air of authenticity – even to the extent of reproducing passages from the book on screen. Meanwhile, in order to fully “picturize” (a Time Inc. advertisement's term for the adaptation process) Eisenhower's memoir, editors had sifted through 165 million feet of archival combat footage that had been procured by special arrangement from repositories in the U.S. and abroad. Most of it had never before been screened in public, a level of exclusivity that had been breathlessly promoted in print advertisements for the series. “Now for the first time you can see right in your own home the momentous horror – and glory – of World War II as this historic struggle lives again on your television screen,” one ad crowed. “The people, the battles, the strategy, the decisions that have shaped your life-time unfold before your eyes!”

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<sup>5</sup> On the availability of the series across the U.S., see “Bulletins,” *Broadcasting*, April 25, 1949, 4; Sonia Stein, “Ike's Book Makes TV Debut,” *Washington Post*, May 1, 1949, T1; “TV Shows with Most Outlets,” *Billboard*, August 13, 1949, 13. For ratings, see “June Listening,” *Broadcasting*, August 8, 1949, 59; “Toast of the Town Tops in ARB Three-City Survey,” *Broadcasting*, August 29, 1949, 67; “Telestatus,” *Broadcasting*, October 3, 1949, 52; “Berle Again Leads Hooper Net Ratings,” *Advertising Age*, October 31, 1949, 61; “Teleratings,” *Broadcasting*, November 7, 1949, 60.



Elsewhere, emphasis on the living memory of World War II and the contemporary relevance of its history was accentuated. As an advertisement appearing in *Life* magazine declared, “These films bring back the suspense and heroism of the war years pictured for you in LIFE. Many of you helped make the history they record ... [they] should add to America’s understanding of history and of its own great future.”<sup>6</sup>

Critics were likewise impressed with the series. As syndicated columnist Harriet Van Horne declared, *Crusade in Europe* “adds dignity to a new medium that needs it badly.” For the influential *New York Times* critic Jack Gould, *Crusade in Europe* presented for the first time on American television “a film not only of genuine historical interest, but more importantly, a film which illustrates the vast potentialities of television in the field of video education.” Rather than being dry in its exposition of recent events – for Gould a lamentable characteristic of contemporary newsreels – TV’s *Crusade* closely followed the structure of its source text, prioritizing analysis and explanation in a way that provided valuable insights on the strategic, tactical, and geopolitical considerations that had confronted Allied commanders in the African and European theaters. Here, Gould wrote, was a framework for understanding – and remembering – the war as it was experienced at the highest echelon, whose value was that it placed past and present into perspective, “from the Munich Pact to the present delicate relationship between the West and Moscow.” But nor was *Crusade* tedious educational fare. As the comedian Bob Hope observed, when a new episode came on the box, “the family and kids at home drop

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<sup>6</sup> “On Television Beginning Tonight!” [Advertisement], *New York Times*, May 5, 1949, 54; “Now on Television!” [Advertisement], *Life*, May 2, 1949, 108-9.

everything, even the comics to watch it.” Here was drama and entertainment – the glory and heroism of history come alive.<sup>7</sup>

But as Gould had suggested, Eisenhower’s memory of the Great Crusade and its lessons may have seemed all the more important as relations between East and West chilled in the late 1940s. Just a few days prior to the series’ May 5 premier, *March of Time* producer-director Richard de Rochemont told the *Washington Post* that although Hollywood had enthusiastically supported the war effort with an abundance of films, since 1945, “they’ve been very rare indeed.” Lest Americans forget the moral imperative for opposing totalitarian regimes, and the unity of purpose with which the U.S. and its allies had won the war, it was incumbent upon filmmakers to leverage the power of moving images to refresh the collective memory. Echoing the well-worn Santayanism, he added “the very time to see these films is when you are living in an atmosphere of peace. It’s pictures such as this that will ensure us against forgetting – and we really can’t afford to forget.”<sup>8</sup> Inasmuch as *Crusade in Europe* presented a documentary record of the Second World War for the first time on home television screens, then, it also presented a usable past based on Eisenhower’s own conclusions about the war and its lessons: on the necessity of military preparedness, of international cooperation, and of the importance of preserving and promoting the values of liberal democracy in the new postwar order.

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<sup>7</sup> Harriet Van Horne, “Eisenhower’s Story Sets Pace on Video,” *New York World-Telegram*, May 9, 1949, 11; Jack Gould, “Television in Review,” *New York Times*, May 15, 1949, 9. For a slightly less positive assessment, see Saul Carson, “Education on the Air for What,” *The New Republic*, May 1949, 28. Hope quoted in “‘Here at Last, Television Lives Up to its Promise,’” [Advertisement], *New York Times*, June 2, 1949, 56.

<sup>8</sup> Sonia Stein, “Ike’s Book Makes TV Debut,” *Washington Post*, May 1, 1949, T1.

*Eisenhower's War Memoir*

As the nation's preeminent war hero and chief architect of Allied victories from North Africa to the Ruhr Pocket, Eisenhower had found no shortage of publishers eager for the rights to his war story. Representatives from Simon & Schuster, Colliers, Harper Bros., the North American Newspaper Alliance, and Lippincotts had all sent proposals, but Ike had turned them all down. Though he had from time to time been informally recording his thoughts and observations for a possible memoir since the autumn of 1942, he knew that serious devotion to such a project would only be a distraction from his official responsibilities. If he ever wrote his story, it would have to wait until his retirement. But even then, writing, for which he claimed no great talent, hardly seemed like an appealing way to spend his leisure time. "For one thing, I was really tired," he recalled in his 1967 post-presidential memoir, *At Ease*, "I wanted nothing so much as the opportunity to loaf a while and then try to find out what to do with the rest of my life." Besides, most of the proposals he had received from publishers seemed merely concerned with turning a quick profit in the postwar memoir boom. What he wanted to write, as he told his brother Milton, was a book that would make a worthwhile contribution to the public understanding of the war, regardless of market appeal.<sup>9</sup>

Through his remaining years on active duty, Eisenhower remained cool to the idea of a memoir. As he would reveal in a speech at a luncheon sponsored by the American Booksellers Association the day after *Crusade in Europe* was finally released, he had long felt that "there were many reasons, cogent reasons why I should not write a book." The war, for one, "was an old story" by the time he had retired in early 1948;

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<sup>9</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, *At Ease: Stories I Tell to Friends* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 324.

there was drama, crisis, and tragedy enough in the present without having to revisit the past. Moreover, the way he understood it, “an old soldier is supposed to retire quietly to his place of rest and not talk too much about his former deeds.” War stories only invited endless re-litigation of the difficult life-and-death decisions that a commander had to make on the field of battle, questions with “a thousand tangents” that the armchair generals seldom understood. What had eventually persuaded him to write the book, Eisenhower told his audience, was the opportunity it would afford him to impart the chief lessons the war had taught him: That the teamwork and cooperation that had won the war could usefully be applied in the future.<sup>10</sup>

Eisenhower had finally been persuaded to start work on his memoir after a series of meetings in the winter of 1947-48 with Douglas Black of Doubleday and William Robinson of the *New York Herald-Tribune*. As Black recalled years later, though the sum the publishers had offered the general had likely exceeded those of other suitors, he and Robinson had also tugged at Ike’s sense of duty.<sup>11</sup> Future historians, they reminded Eisenhower, would inevitably refer to contemporary accounts as primary source material for their narratives. But as the general had often complained, a good number of the memoirs that had been rushed to market after the war had been “riddled with inaccuracies.” If the Supreme Allied Commander failed to set the record straight, Black and Robinson warned, these inaccuracies would eventually pass for history. “A lot of people are telling stories about this war,” Black recalled Eisenhower finally saying, and

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<sup>10</sup> “Nations Called Averse to War by Eisenhower,” *New York Herald-Tribune*, November 24, 1948, 19; “1800 in Book Group Hear Eisenhower,” *New York Times*, November 24, 1948, 21.

<sup>11</sup> The Doubleday/New York Herald-Tribune offer was an unprecedented \$635,000. Owing to a tax loophole at the time, Eisenhower, who was not a professional writer, was able to report the sale of *Crusade in Europe* as a capital gain rather than ordinary income. As a result, he was able to keep the lion’s share of the sale price. See Steve Neal, *The Eisenhowers: Reluctant Dynasty* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978), 242.

he had wanted to “put down what [he] knew about it.” Still, Eisenhower had made it clear to his publishers that he would not begin work on the manuscript until he was relieved as Army Chief of Staff in February 1948 and even asked that the deal be kept confidential until that time.<sup>12</sup>

Using the limited time available to him during his terminal leave from the Army, and before taking up his first civilian position as president of Columbia University, Eisenhower maintained a rigorous writing regimen, completing his manuscript in just over seven weeks, “at a speed that a soldier would call a blitz.”<sup>13</sup> Beginning each day with a breakfast conference sharply at 9 a.m., the general and his three assistants would typically work until midnight, stopping only briefly for lunch – at Mamie Eisenhower’s insistence – which was served in the Eisenhowers’ dining room, rather than in the office as the general may have preferred. For sixteen hours a day, Eisenhower paced up and down his office, dictating every word to one of his assistants while the other two were kept busy with research and revisions. Most of the material came from Eisenhower’s own extraordinary memory. But when this needed some refreshing, he would refer to his wartime files, diary entries, and assorted memoranda and correspondence. On one occasion, according to a *Herald-Tribune* editor who frequently checked in on the operation, the general dictated nonstop nearly five thousand words, little of which required editing. At other times, Eisenhower’s aides worried that the general might

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<sup>12</sup> Douglas M. Black, *Reminiscences of Douglas M. Black: Oral History* (Columbia University Oral History Project, 1967), 11-18; Eisenhower, *At Ease*, 325. In a letter to Winston Churchill written on the fourth anniversary of D-Day, Eisenhower explained that he had eventually been persuaded to write his memoir “chiefly because so many biased and prejudiced accounts were being written by irresponsible people.” Dwight D. Eisenhower to Winston Churchill, June 6, 1948, in *The Papers of Dwight D. Eisenhower*, ed. Louis Galambos, Volume X. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 98-99.

<sup>13</sup> Eisenhower, *At Ease*, 326.

absentmindedly walk out the door trailing sentences and paragraphs down the hall. “It was a tough grind for all of us,” Eisenhower later recalled, “but in a way it was fun.”<sup>14</sup>

With the manuscript completed, Eisenhower made final arrangements with Black and Robinson for its sale the following October.<sup>15</sup> Slated for a November 22 release by Doubleday, the book was, in the meantime, serialized by the *Herald-Tribune* and its national syndicates. Still somewhat uncertain of the volume’s commercial viability, Eisenhower quipped to his publishers that he had saddled them with “a new and expensive white elephant.” On the contrary, Black and Robinson assured the general, they weren’t so sure that they were being entirely fair to him.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, pre-publication orders that had been offered through licensed retailers and the Book-of-the-Month Club quickly broke records. At 100,000 copies, *Crusade in Europe* was the largest advance sale for a non-fiction book in Doubleday history. Benefiting greatly from the holiday season and an extravagant advertising campaign, the publisher was able to report that, from its initial release to Christmas Eve, retailers had ordered some 235,000 copies, translating to over \$1 million in sales. In all, Eisenhower’s war memoir would remain on national best-seller lists well into the spring and would sell more than a million copies worldwide.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Travis Beal Jacobs, *Eisenhower at Columbia* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2001), 71; Berwin Kaiser, “No Ghostly Finger Tapped a Word of Gen. Ike’s Book,” *Washington Post*, October 31, 1948, B3; Eisenhower, *At Ease*, 327.

<sup>15</sup> To qualify for the lower capital gains tax on the sale of his book, Eisenhower had to hold on to the completed manuscript for six months before turning it over to the publishers. See Neal, *The Eisenhowers*, 242.

<sup>16</sup> Eisenhower, *At Ease*, 328.

<sup>17</sup> “Eisenhower Advance Sale Breaks Nonfiction Records,” *Publishers Weekly*, November 6, 1948, 1975; “Eisenhower Book Hailed,” *New York Times*, October 15, 1948, 20; Doubleday & Co., “Thanks,” [Advertisement], *Publishers Weekly*, January 15, 1949. *Crusade in Europe* would remain on the *Publishers Weekly* best-seller list until June 11, 1949 and on the *New York Times* list until May 8.

For the most part, reviewers appreciated the rigor and sincerity of Ike's approach, as well as his equanimity in recounting those episodes that had become controversial in public memory. Echoing Eisenhower's own thoughts on the matter, one reviewer had lamented that the effect of the postwar memoir boom had been "to stir up so cloudy a froth of recrimination as almost to obscure totally the real accomplishments of the Western Allies and their commander in Europe."<sup>18</sup> *Crusade in Europe* had cut through the confusion, offering the public a refreshingly frank review of the war years as they were experienced at the very nerve center of the Allied advance. As *New York Times* war correspondent Drew Middleton observed in his own review, "Now, as he did so often during those years, General Eisenhower has come along to put the picture into perspective." Supported by a network of footnotes, photographs, and maps, Eisenhower had published a meticulous, yet readable account that had, Middleton wrote, described for the American people "better than any other such book, what their kin did during those campaigns, how they did it, and what manner of man commanded them."<sup>19</sup>

But beyond the day-to-day business of military planning and strategy, *Crusade in Europe* constituted Eisenhower's most definitive public statement of his own convictions concerning the purpose and meaning of the war to date. Indeed, his choice of title left little ambiguity about the moralistic, even religious terms in which he understood the conflict. In a particularly revealing passage explaining his reasons for breaking with military custom and refusing to personally accept the surrender of a Wehrmacht general at the end of the Tunisian campaign, Eisenhower wrote that, in his view

*World War II was far too personal a thing to entertain such feelings. Daily as it progressed there grew within me the conviction that as never before in war*

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<sup>18</sup> Marshall Andrews, "'Crusade' Squelches Arguments," *Washington Post*, November 21, 1948, B6.

<sup>19</sup> Drew Middleton, "The War as Eisenhower Saw It," *New York Times*, November 21, 1948, B1.

*between many nations the forces that stood for human good and men's rights were this time confronted by a completely evil conspiracy with which no compromise could be tolerated. Because only by the utter destruction of the Axis was a decent world possible, the war became for me a crusade in the traditional sense of that often misused word.*<sup>20</sup>

For Eisenhower, this had been a different kind of war: a zero-sum conflict between democracy on one hand and totalitarianism on the other. It had required the Allied nations to overcome their own petty self-interest and unite towards a common purpose. “The true history of the war,” Eisenhower proclaimed in his opening pages, “is the story of unity produced on the basis of voluntary cooperation.” Inevitably, there had been differences in opinion among the allies in regard to strategy. “But these paled in comparison alongside the miracle of achievement represented in the shoulder-to-shoulder march of the Allies to complete victory in the West.” Military history was replete with examples of inept or ineffective coalitions, easily unwound by internal conflict and divided aims. Axis totalitarianism had posed such a threat to human freedom and dignity, Eisenhower wrote however, that the United Nations had been galvanized in a single mission to which they had committed themselves to an extent that had never before been achieved.<sup>21</sup>

Such a miracle of achievement had obvious resonance in the postwar era. Indeed, as Eisenhower told his audience at the American Booksellers Association after the release of his memoir, it would have been “useless and a mistake” if *Crusade in Europe* did not contain “a few lessons to apply to the future.”<sup>22</sup> As a coda to his memoir, therefore – a chapter simply titled “Russia” – Eisenhower offered perspective and recommendations on

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<sup>20</sup> Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe*, 157.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>22</sup> “1800 in Book Group Hear Eisenhower,” *New York Times*, November 24, 1948, 21.



contemporary affairs based upon his experiences both as a military commander and an official visitor (at Stalin's personal invitation) to the Soviet Union in 1945. With a mixture of hopefulness and caution, Eisenhower reported that while cooperation between East and West had initially held great promise, diplomatic and ideological tensions had strained the relationship between the former allies to the extent that a new war was foreseeable, but "terrifying to contemplate." But while Eisenhower was confident that there was no imminent danger of renewed hostilities, the "compelling necessities" of the postwar order, coupled with the still-fresh experience of the last war, left the U.S. and its allies "no alternative to the maintenance of real and respectable strength – not only in our moral rectitude and our economic power, but in terms of adequate military preparedness."<sup>23</sup>

In setting forth this argument in the final chapter of his memoir, Eisenhower had begun the delicate task of charting what historians have called a "middle way" for U.S. foreign policy between maintaining public support for military preparedness while resisting pressures to use it.<sup>24</sup> On the one hand, like other military professionals at the time, Eisenhower was alarmed by the deep cuts to military spending that had been enacted by Congress as part of a general postwar demobilization. Such cuts, he argued, would leave the nation with a dangerous lack of resources, training, and personnel with which to deter – or in the worst case, conduct – future conflicts with the Soviet Union. On the other hand, however, excessive military buildup and an aggressive foreign policy

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<sup>23</sup> During his speech to the ABA, Eisenhower said that while he "would not dare to predict ... that there will never be another war," he did not believe that any nation would "deliberately provoke another war." See "Nations Called Averse to War By Eisenhower," *New York Herald-Tribune*, November 24, 1948, 19. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe*, 458.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Ira Chernus's discussion of *Crusade in Europe* in *General Eisenhower: Ideology and Discourse* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2002).

stance might lead to misunderstanding and inadvertently provoke war. Rather than rely solely on military strength to deter Soviet expansionism, therefore, Eisenhower advised that the Western democracies would need to work together in the future to counteract Communist appeals to the Third World “with practical measures untiringly prosecuted for the elimination of social and economic evils that set men against men.”<sup>25</sup>

For Eisenhower, then, the crusade in Europe was far from over. In 1948 – just as in 1938 – a dangerous enemy, whose ideology was diametrically opposed to everything for which the West stood, was threatening the peace-loving peoples of the world. If the cold war boiled over, it could only conclude by survival or annihilation. And so, as they had during World War II, it was essential that ordinary Americans do their part. “If they can retain the moral integrity, the clarity of comprehension, and the readiness to sacrifice that finally crushed the Axis,” Eisenhower admonished in his closing lines, “then the free world will live and prosper, and all peoples, eventually, will reach a level of culture, contentment, and security that has never before been achieved.”<sup>26</sup> Before long, television would transmit this message to American homes nationwide.

### *The March of Time and the Television Adaptation*

Two days before *Crusade in Europe* was released by Doubleday, the publisher struck a deal with Twentieth Century-Fox granting the studio exclusive television rights to the book.<sup>27</sup> Having no documentary unit of its own, Fox subcontracted the production

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<sup>25</sup> Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe*, 476.

<sup>26</sup> Eisenhower, *Crusade*, 478.

<sup>27</sup> Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation v. Dastar Corporation 539 U.S. 23 (2003). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the television adaptation of *Crusade in Europe* was at the center of a copyright dispute between the two companies. In the 1970s, Twentieth Century-Fox had allowed its copyright on *Crusade in Europe* to lapse, and in the 1990s, Dastar released its own video set, titled *Campaigns in Europe*, which repurposed footage from the original *Crusade* series. Fox subsequently sued Dastar, arguing that, despite

work to *The March of Time*, whose news films it had been distributing for several years.<sup>28</sup>

In the meantime, Fox had negotiated a lease of the broadcast distribution rights to *Crusade in Europe* to ABC for a period of 21 months, during which time the network expected to re-air the entire series three times. The idea was that in the intervening months television audiences – and subsequently advertiser investments – would grow.<sup>29</sup> ABC, in turn, would distribute the telefilms to 33 local stations and affiliates including its five owned-and-operated stations. All told, *Crusade in Europe* was “the biggest output of motion pictures by a film company specifically designed for television to date,” according to Twentieth Century-Fox TV chief Peter Levathes.<sup>30</sup>

This was not hyperbole. Hollywood’s condescension toward the upstart medium was widely known at the time. Faced with a postwar slump, moreover, there was significant concern among moviemakers and theater owners that television’s success would come at the expense of their already dwindling audiences.<sup>31</sup> As a result, there had been little cooperation between the television and movie industries until Levathes, with the tacit support of Twentieth Century-Fox president Spyros Skouras, signed the *Crusade* deal. Not everyone in the industry was as optimistic, however. Many years later, Levathes would recall a tense exchange in Skouras’s office over Fox’s television foray with MGM president Nicholas Schenck. According to Levathes, one day after word got

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the lapse of the copyright, the uncredited appropriation of footage constituted “reverse passing off” in violation of the Lanham Act. On appeal, the case was heard by the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled in Dastar’s favor.

<sup>28</sup> Elson, *The World of Time Inc.*, Vol. 2, 264.

<sup>29</sup> American Broadcasting Company, *Report on 1949* (New York: American Broadcasting Company, 1950), 34; “‘Crusade’ Film for Local Sponsorship,” *Broadcasting/Telecasting*, November 7, 1949, 7.

<sup>30</sup> “Eisenhower: ABC Acquires TV Film Rights to His Book,” *Broadcasting/Telecasting*, February 7, 1949, 36.

<sup>31</sup> James L. Baughman, *Same Time, Same Station: Creating American Television, 1948-1961* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 35-41; William Boddy, *Fifties Television: The Industry and its Critics* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 132-154.

around that he had made the deal for the television rights to *Crusade in Europe*, he found himself summoned to Skouras's office. The boss had been in a meeting with Schenck, and as Levathes walked in, Skouras asked the MGM president to repeat what he had just said a few moments earlier. "I think you should be fired," Schenck bluntly told Levathes. "You're gonna destroy the theater business by putting shows on television." After Schenck left, however, Skouras, who had been eyeing an entry into television for some time, assured Levathes that Fox would indeed make the films.<sup>32</sup>

Likewise, for *The March of Time*, adapting Eisenhower's memoir for the small screen was the outfit's first attempt at producing films specifically for television, though its staff did have previous broadcast experience. Several years before its iconic run as a short film series, *The March of Time* had been a successful radio program, airing first on the CBS network, and later on NBC. Developed by Time Inc. General Manager Roy Larsen and Editor Fred Smith, who were looking for an innovative way to promote the company's flagship magazine, the series presented dramatic reenactments of the news events of the day using sound effects, music, and professional actors hired to portray well-known newsmakers and celebrities – this at a time when radio news reports were rare, and typically involved reading newspaper articles verbatim (and often without permission) over the air. Indeed, before the advent of magnetic tape recording, portable audio equipment, and the organization of broadcast news divisions, microphones were rarely on hand when significant news events unfolded. *The March of Time* reenactments

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<sup>32</sup> Levathes quoted in Jeff Kisseloff, *The Box: An Oral History of Television, 1920-1961* (New York: Penguin, 1995), 288-289. On Skouras's position vis-à-vis television, see Peter Lev, *Twentieth Century-Fox: The Zanuck-Skouras Years, 1935-1961* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2013), 113-115. In late 1944, there had been some talk about Fox and Time Inc. teaming up to form their own television network. See C. L. Stillman, "Memorandum on Contact with Fox on Television," December 27, 1944, box 440, folder 12, Time Inc. Records, Manuscripts Collection, New-York Historical Society.

cleverly worked around these limitations by hiring actors to re-stage news stories, breathing life into the day's events and vastly expanding the scope of radio's public affairs coverage.<sup>33</sup> The series' reenactments, meanwhile, were clearly identified as such for the listeners. As the premier installment of the radio series proclaimed, "On a thousand fronts the history of the world moves swiftly forward ... Tonight the editors of *Time* ... attempt a new kind of reporting of the news – the reenacting as clearly and dramatically as the medium of radio will permit of some memorable scenes from the news of the week." The innovative approach quickly earned a following and praise from reviewers.<sup>34</sup>

Following the initial success of *The March of Time* radio reenactments, Larsen and Smith had the idea of producing the series as a newsreel. Nothing much was done about the project for several years, however, until Louis de Rochemont, the director of short subjects at Fox Movietone News, approached Larsen with his own proposal for adapting the series to the big screen. A talented documentary filmmaker in his own right, de Rochemont had made films for the Navy during World War I and had produced and directed newsreels on a freelance basis for a number of years before joining Fox Movietone in the mid-1920s. Growing dissatisfied with the mediocrity of most productions, and the industry's narrow focus on profitability, de Rochemont created an experimental film series while at Fox Movietone called *The March of the Years*. Clearly inspired by *The March of Time* radio series, the films depicted historical "news" stories – like the end of the Tweed Ring, the prohibition movement of the 1880s, and Commodore

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<sup>33</sup> Lawrence W. Lichty and Thomas W. Bohn, "Radio's 'March of Time': Dramatized News," *Journalism Quarterly* 51 (1974): 458-462; Robert T. Elson, *The World of Time Inc.: The Intimate History of a Publishing Enterprise*. Volume 1. (New York: Atheneum, 1968), 175-185.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Elson, *The World of Time Inc.* Volume 1., 178.

Perry's expedition to Japan – by combining re-enactments with footage culled from the Fox Movietone archives.<sup>35</sup> The technique of combining re-enactments with archival footage – a significant cost-saver – impressed Larsen. With the blessing of Time Inc. chairman Henry Luce, he hired de Rochemont, and together the pair set out to revolutionize pictorial journalism.<sup>36</sup>

After some eight months of experimentation, the film version of *The March of Time* premiered in February 1935. It was a radical departure from the stale formulae of its competitors' "jumpy little postcard collections," as one observer called them.<sup>37</sup> What Larsen and de Rochemont had aimed for, was a celluloid version of Time Inc.'s print journalism, covering important stories with the same kind of perspective and insight that readers had come to expect from *Time*, *Life*, or *Fortune* magazines. Each "issue" of the film series would feature up to five two-minute segments on major domestic, international, and human-interest stories that blended on-the-spot film coverage with dramatic reenactments and a musical score. As on the radio, all of it was bound together by the narration of Westbrook Van Voorhis, the orotund "Voice of Time." The result was wildly successful, but it wasn't quite a newsreel as the genre had come to be understood. As the pioneering British documentarian John Grierson remarked in 1937, *The March of Time* went beyond trivialities. "It gets behind the news, observes the factors of influence, and gives a perspective to events. Not the parade of armies so much as the race in

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<sup>35</sup> de Rochemont's experiment bears some resemblance to CBS's *You Are There* program, developed in the 1940s for radio and 1950s for television (see Chapter 3), though there appears to be no connection between them.

<sup>36</sup> Raymond Fielding, *The March of Time, 1935-1951* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 28-40; Elson, *The World of Time Inc.* Volume 1., 225-227.

<sup>37</sup> Andrew Buchanan, *The Art of Film Production* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, 1936), 72.

armaments; not the ceremonial opening of a dam but the full story of Roosevelt's experiments in the Tennessee Valley."<sup>38</sup>

Distributed to some 9,800 theaters at its peak in the late 1930s, *The March of Time* was a familiar part of the weekly movie-going experience for tens of millions of Americans.<sup>39</sup> But despite its popular and critical success (it won two Oscars), the films were never a profit-generator for Time Inc. "In the prewar years," explains former executive Robert T. Elson in his official three-volume history of Time Inc., "management believed that its minimal losses were money well invested because of the prestige that both *Time* and *Life* derived from it."<sup>40</sup> In other words, like the earlier radio program, *The March of Time* film series was a high-profile loss leader that the company was willing to maintain as long as it continued to add value and its costs remained reasonable.

Beset by a number of financial and operational difficulties during the early to mid-1940s, however, the series began a gradual decline: With the onset of the war, Louis de Rochemont had taken on a number of projects in addition to the monthly release of *The March of Time* and worked himself to the point of physical exhaustion, and he left *The March of Time* to produce feature-length documentary films for Twentieth Century-Fox (though another account claims that de Rochemont had become increasingly frustrated with Larsen's autocratic management style; both may be true). Meanwhile, wartime restrictions had increased the cost of production materials and greatly limited access to foreign news sources. And there was little relief after 1945. Production costs

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<sup>38</sup> John Grierson, "The Course of Realism," in *Grierson on Documentary*, ed. Forsyth Hardy (New York: Praeger, 1966), 201-202.

<sup>39</sup> Raymond Fielding, *The March of Time, 1935-1951* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 110; Elson, *The World of Time Inc.* Volume 1, 237-38.

<sup>40</sup> Robert T. Elson, *The World of Time Inc.: The Intimate History of a Publishing Empire*. Volume 2. (New York: Atheneum, 1973), 264.

continued to outpace revenue, and theater audiences, once captivated by the crises unfolding in Europe and Asia in the 1930s, now preferred lighter fare in the short subject category – especially cartoons.<sup>41</sup> As a result of flagging revenues, Richard de Rochemont, who had joined *The March of Time* with his older brother in 1934 and succeeded now him as producer, began to press for further involvement in the emerging television industry.

Though Time Inc. executives had met with representatives from NBC (which was at that time broadcasting *The March of Time* radio series) as early as 1939 to arrange the purchase of *March of Time* prints for broadcast and discuss the possibility of future collaboration, the partnership hadn't materialized at the time. The network's experiment in regularly scheduled television service, which had launched with much ballyhoo the previous spring at the New York World's Fair, was beset with structural and regulatory uncertainties that were likely to have been too risky for Time Inc.<sup>42</sup> In any event, U.S. involvement in World War II would temporarily halt experimentation in the field as personnel, resources, and manufacturing infrastructures were redirected to the war effort. Still, Luce and his staff had perceived that television would become a powerful mass medium in the postwar years, and, eager to secure a favorable position in the emerging cultural order, they kept a keen eye on industry developments. Though there had been some talk within the company about the possibility of purchasing a broadcast station license, or of partnering with one of the networks to produce a regular newscast, there

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<sup>41</sup> Robert T. Elson, *The World of Time Inc.: The Intimate History of a Publishing Empire*. Volume 2. (New York: Atheneum, 1973), 263-264; Raymond Fielding, *The March of Time, 1935-1951* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 281-285; 301.

<sup>42</sup> John R. Wood, Jr. to Roy Larsen, November 19, 1941, box 440, folder 12, Time Inc. Records, Manuscript Collection, New-York Historical Society. On the uncertain future of the television industry at this time, see Gary R. Edgerton, *The Columbia History of American Television* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 3-16; 60-66.



was still much uncertainty about the economics of the new medium.<sup>43</sup> No one at Time Inc. – or in the industry for that matter – was quite sure how TV would pay. By the time the TV networks had launched their first fully scheduled season in 1948, however, there was a growing consensus within the company that Time Inc. ought to get into television by producing stand-alone films or limited series which, if no sponsorship deals could be made, could at the very least be used to promote *Time* and *Life*.<sup>44</sup>

The *Crusade in Europe* deal offered Time Inc. just such an opportunity – a limited, 26-part television series that would allow *March of Time* producers to experiment with adapting their techniques to the small screen. Finding advertisers proved a bit more difficult, however. Though the situation was less than ideal, Time Inc. itself eventually stepped in to sponsor the first broadcast run as a promotion for *Time* and *Life*.<sup>45</sup>

Final arrangements between Twentieth Century-Fox, Time Inc., and Doubleday were made in November 1948, and work on *Crusade in Europe* began promptly on January 1. Much like Eisenhower's own work preparing his manuscript for publication, adapting the memoir to television was a grueling process. Consistent with established

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<sup>43</sup> Charles L. Stillman, "Memorandum on Contact with Fox on Television," December 27, 1944, box 440, folder 12, Time Inc. Records, Manuscript Collection, New-York Historical Society; Francis Brennan, "TV and Time Inc.," March 1948, box 440, folder 12, Time Inc. Records, Manuscript Collection, New-York Historical Society; "Notes on the Preliminary Meeting of TV Committee," March 15, 1949, box 440, folder 13, Time Inc. Records, Manuscript Collection, New-York Historical Society.

<sup>44</sup> Andrew Heiskell to Larsen and Black, "A Proposal on Television," November 17, 1948, box 440, folder 12, Time Inc. Records, Manuscript Collection, New-York Historical Society; "Notes on the Preliminary Meeting of TV Committee," March 15, 1949, box 440, folder 13, Time Inc. Records, Manuscript Collection, New-York Historical Society; "Second Meeting of TV Committee," March 21, 1949, box 440, folder 13, Time Inc. Records, Manuscript Collection, New-York Historical Society; "Third Meeting of TV Committee," April 4, 1949, box 440, folder 13, Time Inc. Records, Manuscript Collection, New-York Historical Society.

<sup>45</sup> "Radio and Television," *New York Times*, April 7, 1949, 58; "Time Buys 'Crusade'" *Advertising Age*, April 11, 1949, 61; "Bulletins," *Broadcasting/Telecasting*, April 25, 1949, 4; Sonia Stein, "Ike's Book Makes TV Debut," *Washington Post*, May 1, 1949, T1; Francis Brennan to Andrew Heiskell, March 29, 1949, box 440, folder 13, Time Inc. Records, Manuscript Collection, New-York Historical Society.

*March of Time* methods, the series would be composed predominantly of archival footage supplied by special arrangement with official repositories in the United States and abroad, including the Army Signal Corps, the Navy, Coast Guard, the British War Office, the French Archives, and the Film Board of Canada. After Eisenhower's 478-page book had been subdivided into twenty-six 20-minute installments by the writer and *Life* magazine editor Fred Feldkamp, it fell to veteran *March of Time* staffer Arthur Tourtellot and his team of eight editors to sift through mountains of combat footage to find clips to match Feldkamp's teleplay.<sup>46</sup> Working somewhere between 12 and 16-hours a day, Tourtellot and his team screened some 165 million feet of film.<sup>47</sup>

The level of access to official, previously classified films had been unprecedented, and promotions for the series played the exclusivity to the hilt. Under a boldfaced heading that proclaimed, "Television Scores Again!" one advertisement enthused,

*World War II was the most thoroughly filmed event in human history. From 165,000,000 feet of film taken by newsreels, the Army, the Navy, from captured German and Japanese films ... the editors selected the best scenes to add to the carefully documented text of General Eisenhower's book. These are motion pictures you have never seen before! These are motion pictures you will never forget! See history parade before you ... Thrill at home to the terrific impact of this film of the historic struggle that was World War II!*<sup>48</sup>

That World War II had been the most thoroughly filmed event in history up until that time had been evident to American audiences from the panoply of newsreels and government-sponsored documentaries that had appeared on American cinema screens

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<sup>46</sup> Sonia Stein, "Ike's Book Makes TV Debut," *Washington Post*, May 1, 1949, T1-2; Fred Hif, "Crusade in Europe: Editors Sifted Miles of Film for TV Series," *New York Times*, May 5, 1949, 9; "Crusader," June 24, 1949, box 401, folder 39, Time Inc. Records, Manuscript Collection, New-York Historical Society.

<sup>47</sup> Arthur Tourtellot to Richard de Rochemont, November 27, 1950, box 440, folder 13, Time Inc. Records, Manuscript Collection, New-York Historical Society.

<sup>48</sup> "On Television Beginning Tonight!" [Advertisement], *New York Times*, May 5, 1949, 54.

through the war years. Well aware of the power of moving images to shape public attitudes, the U.S. War Department had sought to enlist the help of the movie industry early on in the conflict. While Hollywood studios jealously guarded their independence from government oversight, a few filmmakers – including John Ford, Frank Capra, George Stevens, William Wyler, and John Huston – eagerly volunteered their services. As commissioned officers, these men were put in charge of photography units that shot millions of feet of combat footage throughout the war and produced a number of documentary films depicting American servicemen in action for the audiences back home. Designed to inform as well as entertain, official films like Capra’s *Why We Fight* series (1942-1945), Ford’s *The Battle of Midway* (1942), and Huston’s *Battle for San Pietro* (1945) combined combat footage with musical scores, professional voice-overs, and narrative techniques that were consistent with what audiences had come to expect from Hollywood productions.<sup>49</sup> Through these documentaries, filmmakers worked to shape the chaos of war into coherent narratives that could clarify American military objectives for their audiences (which could be military personnel as well as civilians on the home front) and underscore the essential righteousness of the Allied cause.<sup>50</sup>

Though the immense visual record of the war had supplied the grist for a sprawling information-entertainment complex during the war years, for the *March of Time* producers tasked with creating a comprehensive narrative of World War II,

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<sup>49</sup> Mark Harris, *Five Came Back: A Story of Hollywood and the Second World War* (New York: Penguin, 2014); Peter Maslowski, *Armed With Cameras: The American Military Photographers of World War II* (New York: The Free Press, 1993).

<sup>50</sup> Joris Ivens, “Making Documentary Films to Meet Today’s Needs,” *American Cinematographer*, July 1942, 298-99, 332-33.

identifying appropriate clips to use was not always easy.<sup>51</sup> As Tourtellot, a trained historian explained in a company profile, film coverage of certain key battles – Dunkirk or Kasserine Pass, for example – was rare, or missing. Sometimes at such critical moments, combat photographers had to drop their cameras and pick up their rifles. Meanwhile, though there was plenty of captured German footage depicting the invasion of Poland and other offensives, those films had been originally intended as Axis propaganda pieces, and their perspectives had been grossly skewed in favor of Nazi war aims.<sup>52</sup>

Despite the tremendous amount of archival footage, Tourtellot and his editors occasionally came up empty handed. To bridge the gap in the visual record, or to illustrate some of the more abstract themes within Eisenhower's book, *March of Time* producers resorted to staging reenactments. For example, among the several lessons that Eisenhower had hoped his book would impart, were the pernicious consequences of prewar isolationism and unpreparedness. By way of depicting these lessons, the premier episode of *Crusade in Europe*, titled "Prelude to War," included a scene in which two actors portraying American businessmen (circa 1940), blithely discuss a newspaper story about Nazi aggression in far-off Europe: "The way I see it," says one actor in the scene, "we stuck our noses into Europe's mess in 1917 and we got nothing for it. I say we ought to keep hands off." "Don't give it another thought, Joe," the other replies. "With all that water between us and Hitler, he can't hurt us." Seemingly oblivious to what lay ahead,

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<sup>51</sup> For more on the wartime information and entertainment industry and its postwar afterlife, see Philip D. Biedler, *The Good War's Greatest Hits: World War II and American Remembering* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1998).

<sup>52</sup> "Crusader," June 24, 1949, box 401, folder 39, Time Inc. Records, Manuscript Collection, New-York Historical Society.

the second businessman abruptly changes the subject. Turning to the sports page, he asks his companion, “say, what do you think of the Tiger’s chances for a pennant this year?”<sup>53</sup>

Combining elements from Eisenhower’s memoir with the style of a *March of Time* newsreel and combat documentary films, television’s *Crusade in Europe* exemplified the continuity between wartime and postwar media production – what the media scholar Philip D. Biedler has called the entertainment industry’s “ongoing production of the war itself” that constitutes one of most salient ways that Americans have remembered the war.<sup>54</sup> Broadcast over a period of six months, the *Crusade in Europe* was meant to remind American audiences of the reasons why, as the producers saw it, they had as a nation fought so fiercely against the spread of Axis totalitarianism, and of the sacrifices that had been made by their brothers, fathers, and sons in the service of a noble cause. The result was a documentary epic of World War II: A compilation film with a classically heroic take on the Allied project, recounting on a grand scale the existential struggle waged by the U.S. and its allies against the forces of regimentation, barbarism, and evil.

### *The Television Epic*

Following Aristotle’s *Poetics*, which for 2,300 years has remained a touchstone for dramatic theory and literary criticism, the epic has traditionally been understood as a long narrative poem, composed in an elevated (serious) style, which recounts the story of

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<sup>53</sup> *Crusade in Europe*. “Prelude to War.” Directed by Richard de Rochemont (1949; Orland Park, IL: MPI Media 2009), DVD. Other staged scenes are briefly discussed in Fred Hif, “Crusade in Europe: Editors Sifted Miles of Film for TV Series,” *New York Times*, May 5, 1949, 9.

<sup>54</sup> Philip D. Biedler, *The Good War’s Greatest Hits: World War II and American Remembering* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1998), 7.

a hero (or heroes) whose exploits and struggles are central to the emergence of a community or national consciousness of which bard and listeners are a part. Typically set in the mists of time immemorial, the world of the epic, as the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin has observed, is that of “‘beginnings’ and ‘peak times’ in national history, a world of fathers and of founders of families, a world of ‘firsts’ and ‘bests.’”<sup>55</sup> Its range, moreover, is encyclopedic; it is a unified and totalizing narrative whose themes encompass an entirety of relevant social knowledge – a catalogue of customs, rituals, and traditions concerning life and death, heaven and earth, politics, ethics, and history.<sup>56</sup>

Though ancient in its origins, the epic is hardly an antiquated genre. In the modern era, epic motifs have persisted across a range of narrative forms beyond the poetic, and particularly in film.<sup>57</sup> Early in the twentieth century, producer-directors D.W. Griffith and Cecil B. DeMille quickly capitalized on the popular appeal of the grand cinematic spectacle. Their work – for example, Griffith’s notoriously racist *Birth of a Nation* (1915), and DeMille’s sprawling biblical trilogy, *The Ten Commandments* (1923), *King of Kings* (1927), and *Sign of the Cross* (1932) – established the pattern for monumental Hollywood productions that featured exotic settings, lavish production design, panoramic photography, and “a cast of thousands” that would last into the 1960s and beyond. Like their literary antecedents, Hollywood’s epic films constructed highly

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<sup>55</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (New York: Penguin Books, 1996); Mikhail Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), 13.

<sup>56</sup> The description of the epic as one among a number of “encyclopedic” forms comes from Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 315-326. See also Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1963), 61-86. In these pages, Havelock describes the Homeric epics as “a compilation of inherited lore,” and “a tribal encyclopedia” of the Greeks.

<sup>57</sup> See for example Robert Burgoyne, *The Epic Film in World Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2011); and Andrew B. R. Elliott, *The Return of the Epic Film: Genre, Aesthetics, and History in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2014). Cf. Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel.”

mythologized interpretations of the national (or more broadly Western) past that could cultivate a sense of collective identity and belonging among a mostly white audience.<sup>58</sup>

Genres can be imprecise categories, however. They tend to blur at the boundaries, and their contours can vary according to who is defining them and for what purpose.<sup>59</sup> But as the literary scholar Luke Arnott has pointed out, what appears to be common to epic works across narrative media are the relationships between the epic hero(s) and their world, the scale of the narrative action, and the form in which the action is narrated. In other words, he writes, using terms from early 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian formalism, “not only must the *fabula* (the story) be epic, but the *syuzhet* (the telling of the story) must be ‘epic’ too.”<sup>60</sup>

Compiled from 165 million feet of archival footage and spanning 26 episodes broadcast over a period of six months, *Crusade in Europe* presented a complete history of World War II whose scope far surpassed previous documentary accounts of the conflict. During the war years and immediately after, films like *The Battle of San Pietro*, *The Battle of Midway*, *Report from the Aleutians* (1943), *The True Glory* (1945), and the *Why We Fight Series* had, for the most part, been centered on American (or Allied) perseverance in specific battles and engagements – their focus determined both by their informative and propaganda functions (that is to say, they mostly covered relatively

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<sup>58</sup> See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: The Athlone Press, 1986), 149.

<sup>59</sup> See Ralph Cohen, “History and Genre,” *New Literary History* 17, no. 2 (1986): 203-218; Amy J. Devitt, “Generalizing about Genre: New Conceptions of an Old Concept,” *College Composition and Communication*, 44, no. 4 (1993): 573-586. Highlighting the subjectivity of the epic-as-genre, Guida Jackson explained in her preface to the ABC-CLIO *Encyclopedia of Literary Epics* that, as a criterion for inclusion, she “followed the guidance that if any scholar has considered a work an epic, it is included, disregarding my personal opinion.” Guida M. Jackson, *Encyclopedia of Literary Epics* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1996), ix.

<sup>60</sup> Luke Arnott, “Epic and Genre: Beyond the Boundaries of Media,” *Comparative Literature* 68, no. 4 (2016), 358.

recent events and not the war as a whole), and by the conventional durations of theatrical films. Most ranged in length between 10 minutes to a little over an hour. In contrast, the episodic structure of television had allowed de Rochemont and his staff to present a much longer (8 ½ hours) narrative of the war, organized into 20-minute installments. Produced nearly four years after the war had ended, moreover, and with access to Eisenhower's memoir and a wealth of archival footage, TV's *Crusade in Europe* could present the war in retrospect as a completed event with a beginning, middle, and end, constituting what television critic Harriet Van Horne called at the time the "definitive pictorial history of World War II."<sup>61</sup>

The epic scale of *Crusade in Europe* matched its story of Manichean, world-altering conflict, the results of which were powerfully depicted in the series' opening scenes. As in Eisenhower's book, the story begins *in media res*, with General Alfred Jodl, Chief-of-Staff of Hitler's defeated Wehrmacht, entering the little schoolhouse in Reims, France, where he will sign the instrument of Germany's absolute surrender to the Western Allies. It is May 7, 1945, Westbrook Van Voorhis' narration booms, and the brief ceremony marked the end of what has been "the most paralyzing war the world had ever known." It has been a war "which had involved millions of men, some of whom fought relentlessly for the domination of the world" – here the picture switches to an extreme close-up of Jodl's taunted face – "and others to give mankind throughout the world the chance to live in freedom and peace" – and here it switches again to footage of Eisenhower and a group of American staff officers at a separate event. As the scene dissolves to a series of images of ruined cities, Van Voorhis describes the catastrophic

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<sup>61</sup> Van Horne, "Eisenhower's Story Sets Pace on Video."



toll that the war had taken on Germany: an estimated eight million of its citizens perished, its major cities destroyed, its industry broken. “For the Allies,” Van Voorhis continues as the picture switches again to rows of white crosses in a military cemetery, “the price of victory was appallingly high, beyond the powers of any statistician to compute.”<sup>62</sup>

As this juxtaposition of images and narration suggests, the epic mode was not the only dramatic form at work in *Crusade in Europe*. For de Rochemont and his editors, the history of the Second World War – much like the Trojan War for Homer – epic was mixed with tragedy: a trial by which the free nations of the world (but in particular the Americans) had learned that they needed to work together – and would have to do so again in the future – to defend the ideals and institutions of liberal democracy from the advances of totalitarianism.<sup>63</sup> That the conflict might have been altogether avoided but for the maniacal ambitions of one man had made the destruction all the more grievous. As images of the Allied cemetery dissolved into a row of swastika flags and footage of a prewar Nazi Party rally, Van Voorhis explained that history had laid the blame for the “costly world struggle” squarely on Adolf Hitler, “the little German house painter who had instilled a hysterical devotion to his party and cause in millions of German men, women, and children.” (The omission of Japanese aggression in China here is interesting). Under the spell of *der Führer*, Germany had annexed neighboring territories

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<sup>62</sup> *Crusade in Europe*. “Prelude to War.” Directed by Richard de Rochemont (1949; Orland Park, IL: MPI Media Group, 2009), DVD.

<sup>63</sup> I am borrowing here from Hayden White, who identifies tragic story archetypes in nineteenth century European historiography as those that result in “somber” reconciliations between human beings that are “more in the nature of resignations of men to the conditions under which they must labor in the world. These conditions, in turn, are asserted to be inalterable and eternal, and the implication is that man cannot change them but must work within them. They set limits on what may be aspired to and what may be legitimately aimed at in the quest for security and sanity in the world.” White, *Metahistory*, 9.

by taking “full advantage of the willingness of more peaceable nations to compromise,” and had swiftly become the masters of Europe – a tide of conquest represented in “Prelude to War” by a series of animated maps and scenes of treaty-signing and Blitzkrieg. But while “the will to conquer for the *Führer*” had surged through the Nazi war machine in 1939-1940 and “the world seemed to be theirs for the taking,” eventually the “cancerous Nazi growth” was excised by the combined efforts of Britain, the U.S., and the world, so that by 1945, Germany was “a nation completely broken in spirit and starving.”

Throughout the series, the visual record of destruction that the European Axis had left in its wake further underscored the war’s tragic dimensions: Footage of doleful Parisians silently watching German troops march into Paris, and of the firebombing of London during the Blitz -the latter appearing as an excerpt from Churchill’s “Finest Hour” speech plays in the background – in “Prelude to War”; scenes of devastation in Naples and other Italian cities in “Rise and Fall of a Dictator” (Episode 10) and “Victory in Italy” (Episode 12); the history of the German occupation of Paris (“the City of Light became a city of sorrow under the shadow of the swastika,” Van Voorhis explains over footage of German officers and troops strutting around the French capital) in “The Liberation of Paris” (Episode 16); footage of Eisenhower entering what he called the “horror camp” at Buchenwald, “indisputable evidence of Nazi brutality and ruthless disregard of every shred of decency” in “Overrunning Germany” (Episode 22) and “American Military Government” (Episode 24); and pictures of the utter ruin of Germany and the plight of Europe’s millions of “DP’s” (Displaced Persons) in “Victory’s Aftermath” (Episode 23) and “American Military Government” had recounted a

monumental human catastrophe – a war that had had no equal in the scale of death and suffering. “Volumes have been, and more volumes will be written on the collapse of world cooperation and the true significance of the events that accompanied the tragedy,” narrated Maurice Joyce, the voice-over actor hired by *The March of Time* to read direct quotations from Eisenhower’s book. As images of children playing amid Europe’s rubble heaps appeared on screen, Joyce continued in Eisenhower’s words, “I felt and hoped that the lessons which six years of unrelenting war had brought to the world would convince everyone everywhere that the employment of force in the international field should of necessity be abjured.”<sup>64</sup>

What may have been the greatest tragedy of the war in Eisenhower’s view, however, were the isolationist attitudes that had permeated American society in the interwar years, and its consequences for military preparedness. In “Prelude to War,” for example, after a scene in which a recording of Prime Minister Chamberlain’s declaration of war with Germany is played for the British nation on BBC radio, and another in which Eisenhower’s own foresight (evidently clearer to him from his post in the Philippines than it was to his countrymen) concerning the inevitability of U.S. entanglement in the “whirlpool of the war” were aired, Van Voorhis reported that, for “millions of Americans,” the European affair “was not worth getting excited about.” What was more important, were “less weighty worries” like horse racing and football. Even as news of

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<sup>64</sup> *Crusade in Europe*. “Victory’s Aftermath.” Directed by Richard de Rochemont (1949; Orland Park, IL: MPI Media Group, 2009), DVD. Though the first part of this quote appears in the 1948 edition of, *Crusade in Europe* (page 476), the second part does not appear in the book at all. It is unclear whether this was a mistake, an imported quote from elsewhere, or something else entirely.

the French defeat and the Battle of Britain reached across the Atlantic, many Americans, Van Voorhis noted, still “preferred to ignore” the war.<sup>65</sup>

Misplaced confidence in America’s geographic insulation from the European conflict had lulled the country into a sense of complacency. Relatively few Americans, explained Joyce-as-Eisenhower of public attitude toward the war in 1940-41, “understood the direct relationship between American prosperity and physical safety on the one hand, and on the other, the existence of a free world beyond our shores.” When the possibility of war began to look more likely in the summer and autumn of 1941, the federal government hastily began to convert the country’s relatively small peacetime army into a force of citizen soldiers who had been drawn from the ranks of the national guard and selective service. Key to this process, as Eisenhower could himself attest from his own participation, had been an intense program of combat training and war games staged throughout the U.S. that autumn, the largest of which had been held in Louisiana. The benefits of these maneuvers had been “incalculable,” Eisenhower reported. They had acclimated troops to large-scale military operations, had improved supply, organization, and communication, and had provided younger officers and staff with practical leadership experience in the field.<sup>66</sup>

Still, intensive training programs for green troops were no substitute for veteran units when the war was joined in December 1941. Though American troops performed well during their first offensives in North Africa, quickly taking the French colonial centers at Algiers and Oran by amphibious assault, the cost of military unpreparedness

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<sup>65</sup> *Crusade in Europe*. “Prelude to War.” Directed by Richard de Rochemont (1949; Orland Park, IL: MPI Media Group, 2009), DVD; Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe*, 5.

<sup>66</sup> *Crusade in Europe*. “America’s Unpreparedness.” Directed by Richard de Rochemont (1949; Orland Park, IL: MPI Media Group, 2009), DVD; Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe*, 11.

had become evident to Eisenhower and his staff during the German counterattack at the Kasserine Pass in February 1943. In “Rommel Routed” (Episode 7), as a mournful trumpet played in the background and images of wounded and mud-caked G.I.’s moved by on screen, Eisenhower explained how the “greenness” of the troops was in part responsible for what he termed an “embarrassment” for American forces – though ever conscientious about his own role and obligation, Eisenhower noted that he and several others “shared responsibility for our week of reverses.”<sup>67</sup> Reiterating the importance of training again at the end of the episode, as images of victorious American and British troops entering Tunis flashed upon the screen, Eisenhower observed, “the important Allied lesson of Tunisia ... was the value of training. Thorough technical, psychological, and physical training is one protection and one weapon that every nation can give to its soldiers before committing them to battle.” Until that distant time when violence and warfare no longer troubled the world, Eisenhower maintained, “it would always be a crime to excuse men from the types and kinds of training that will give them a decent chance for survival in battle.”<sup>68</sup>

In Eisenhower’s account, then, the tragic dimension of World War II – at least from the American perspective – had stemmed from the unsustainable tensions between, on the one hand, Americans’ idealistic (even naïve) expectations of a peaceful isolation

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<sup>67</sup> *Crusade in Europe*. “Rommel Routed.” Directed by Richard de Rochemont (1949; Orland Park, IL: MPI Media Group, 2009), DVD; Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe*, 11. Eisenhower elaborates on the “greenness” of troops more fully in his memoir: “The American divisions involved had not had the benefit of the intensive training programs instituted in the United States following the actual outbreak of the war. They were mainly divisions that had been quickly shipped to the United Kingdom ... Training, during a major part of 1942, was for them a practical impossibility. Commanders and troops were showed the effects of this, and although there was no lack of gallantry and fortitude, their initial effectiveness did not compare with that of the American divisions later brought into action after a full year’s intensive training”; Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe*, 147.

<sup>68</sup> See Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe*, 158. The quote is repeated in Episode 23: “Victory’s Aftermath.”

unencumbered by foreign entanglements, and on the other, the stark realities of global politics and war in the twentieth century. Shaken from their complacency by the brutality of Axis totalitarianism and finally by the surprise attack at Pearl Harbor, Americans had learned of the world's limitations, and, with great reluctance, had reconciled themselves to working within it. The experience had (at least this was Eisenhower's hope) resulted in an epiphany of law, a shared realization that the contemporary world tended towards entropy and violence, and that for the foreseeable future, the maintenance of order required the abandoning of parochial attitudes and a commitment to collective security.<sup>69</sup> To emphasize the point, in the series' penultimate episode on "Russia" and postwar diplomacy, Eisenhower's words were paired with footage from the April 1945 United Nations Conference on International Organization in San Francisco. Against wide shots of the crowded auditorium and flag-bedecked stage were projected onto the screen, Eisenhower admonished, "the democracies must learn that the world is now too small for the rigid concepts of national sovereignty that developed in a time when the nations were self-sufficient and self-dependent for their own well-being and safety. None of them today can stand alone."<sup>70</sup>

By explaining the history of the war in a tragic mode – as a mythos of hubris, Fall, suffering, and reconciliation – *Crusade in Europe* had sustained Eisenhower's conclusions about the importance of military preparedness and mutual cooperation as the appropriate responses to the realities of international affairs. But the epic scale of the

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<sup>69</sup> For Northrop Frye, the "epiphany of the law" elaborated by tragic drama is "that which is and must be" in the natural (cosmic) order; Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 208.

<sup>70</sup> *Crusade in Europe*. "Russia." Directed by Richard de Rochemont (1949; Orland Park, IL: MPI Media Group, 2009), DVD; Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe*, 477.

tragedy depicted by the television series – epic both in terms of its comprehensive account of the war and its story of national emergence – also served to remind Americans of the sense of duty and determination with which they had won the war, and which would be necessary to prevent further tragedies in the future. “If the men and women of America face this issue as squarely and bravely as their soldiers faced the terrors of the battle in World War II,” Eisenhower averred, regarding the tensions between East and West, “we would have no fear of the outcome.”<sup>71</sup> Maintaining the peace in the postwar world would involve values and ideas as much as soldiers and armaments. The story of the war was a record of those values.

Chief among these was national unity. Learning to work within the limitations of the world had required Americans to come together in a common cause. “Few of us saw eye to eye on what was demanded of us as individuals and as a nation,” Eisenhower said at the beginning of “America Goes to War,” which picked up the narrative of the war just after Pearl Harbor, “but each began, step by step, to learn and to perform his allotted task.”<sup>72</sup> President Roosevelt had taken it on himself to orient the nation towards a common goal and emphasize the importance of national unity. In a film clip from his fireside chat of February 23, 1942, Roosevelt warned that “if we can lose this war, it will be only because we slow up our effort and waste our ammunition sniping at each other.” But rather than a general statement, this call to national unity had a specific contextual point. In a statement that was interpreted as an admonishment to union organizers and those who might leverage the war to strengthen their bargaining positions, the president

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<sup>71</sup> *Crusade in Europe*. “Russia.” Directed by Richard de Rochemont (1949; Orland Park, IL: MPI Media Group, 2009), DVD; Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe*, 477.

<sup>72</sup> *Crusade in Europe*. “America Goes to War.” Directed by Richard de Rochemont (1949; Orland Park, IL: MPI Media Group, 2009), DVD; Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe*, 4.

called on Americans to follow “three high purposes.” First, to not stop working and to settle all disputes “the American way,” by arbitration; second, not to demand special privileges or advantages “by any one group or occupation”; third, to “cheerfully” adjust the routines and conveniences of civilian life in furtherance of the war effort and national interest, “remembering that the common enemy seeks to destroy every home and every freedom in every part of our land.”<sup>73</sup> How the project of national unification had required the silencing of labor dissent, however, went unmentioned.

Instead, *Crusade in Europe* symbolized national unity from the perspective of labor and domestic industry by focusing on the dramatized story of a railroad engineer. After discussing the successes of the Army under General Somervell in assisting the U.S. economic transition from a peacetime to a wartime economy in the episode “Africa: Our First Offensive,” Van Voorhis introduces Dick Milette, a twenty-year veteran of the railroad industry. Speaking to a younger colleague about his wartime experience, Milette notes “nothing held up priority freight in those days. When the Army said “rush,” we rushed.” As the scene switched to a shot of a railroad junction, he continued “we spent a lot of time in the cab in those days. But we knew that if we slowed up on the job, it meant that the men at the front wouldn’t have all the equipment and supplies they needed.” Describing the massive conversion of the wartime economy and the participation of private industry, Van Voorhis continued, “united in the common cause, the American people in every part of the country forgot political and economic differences and worked

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<sup>73</sup> *Crusade in Europe*. “America Goes to War.” Directed by Richard de Rochemont (1949; Orland Park, IL: MPI Media Group, 2009), DVD; Franklin D. Roosevelt, *Fireside Chat: On the Progress of the War*, February 23, 1941. Retrieved from <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/fireside-chat-6>



as they never had before to make our victory on the battlefields possible.”<sup>74</sup> As much as combat on the field, work had won the war, and it was vital that the U.S. continue this ethos of production in the postwar years for the purposes of peace. As President Truman explained in a speech to troops before the Potsdam Conference that was featured in the series, “if we can put this tremendous machine of ours, which has made this victory possible, to work for peace, we can look forward to the greatest age in the history of mankind.”<sup>75</sup>

Depictions of national unity in *Crusade in Europe* had also included scenes depicting the contributions of African-Americans to the war effort. Such depictions, however, glossed over the segregation and racism in the U.S. Army of World War II. In “Platform for Invasion,” for example, as Van Voorhis described the friendly invasion of U.S. troops in English towns and cities in preparation for operations in North Africa, a scene of marching African-American G.I.s are presented as part of the novel appearance of U.S. troops on English streets.<sup>76</sup> As the American military was shipping personnel and equipment to Great Britain, southern white soldiers were also bringing their race prejudices. Since Great Britain had no Jim Crow laws, African-Americans servicemen and women were not barred from any establishment and had been treated quite hospitably by English citizens. Some southern white officers had even insisted that African-American soldiers be denied entrance to establishments frequented by whites. The resulting friction between African-American servicemen and some of their white

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<sup>74</sup> *Crusade in Europe*. “Africa: Our First Offensive.” Directed by Richard de Rochemont (1949; Orland Park, IL: MPI Media Group, 2009), DVD.

<sup>75</sup> *Crusade in Europe*. “American Military Government.” Directed by Richard de Rochemont (1949; Orland Park, IL: MPI Media Group, 2009), DVD.

<sup>76</sup> *Crusade in Europe*. “Platform for Invasion.” Directed by Richard de Rochemont (1949; Orland Park, IL: MPI Media Group, 2009), DVD.

counterparts became so great that, according to the *Chicago Defender*, some English citizens had unofficially adopted Jim Crow policy.<sup>77</sup> In the episode “Battle of Supply,” meanwhile, which described the intricate network of logistics and material support the Allies had organized during their drive across Europe, reference was made to the famed Red Ball Express, but while the predominance of African-Americans in supply roles was apparent on the screen, it was never explicitly mentioned in the series.<sup>78</sup>

The forging of national unity in the war was the work of individuals, and of those, the most highly celebrated was the individual G.I. and the soldiers, sailors, and airmen of the Allied countries to whom Eisenhower dedicated his book. Indeed, the adaptation of *Crusade in Europe* featured an entire episode devoted to “The G.I.: The Hero of the War” (Episode 11). The G.I. was the hero of the epic, more so even than Eisenhower, and his struggle presented by the episode confirms that victory in Europe was accomplished only by the extraordinary grit and determination displayed by the G.I.

The episode began with a staged conversation between two soldiers convalescing in a military hospital and reminiscing about their experiences. To counter the assumption that it was the brass that won the war, or “the more glamorous branches of the service,” but “the guy who got the dirty end of the deal ... was the plain G.I.” His partner agrees and reflects on all of the hardships that the soldiers faced during the march through in Italy. “I thought I’d never get back to the states,” confesses the first soldier, “never eat a

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<sup>77</sup> See “Whitewash of Army Charges Irks Citizens,” *Chicago Defender*, October 6, 1942, 12; “Probe England’s Closing Door to Race Troops,” *Chicago Defender*, November 21, 1942, 2; “Scores Davis Whitewash of Race Prejudice in AEF,” *Chicago Defender*, December 12, 1942, 4; “Red Cross Denies Jim Crow Clubs in England,” *Chicago Defender*, January 16, 1943, 1.

<sup>78</sup> *Crusade in Europe*. “The Battle of Supply.” Directed by Richard de Rochemont (1949; Orland Park, IL: MPI Media Group, 2009), DVD. See Neil A. Wynn, *The African American Experience During World War II* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010); David Colley, *The Road to Victory: The Untold Story of World War II’s Red Ball Express* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey’s, 2000).

mean that didn't come out of a ration can." The scene then dissolves to a succession of shots of soldiers in the Italian campaign eating out of mess cans and looking fairly gloomy at rest in the Italian mud. "The weather turned from bad to worse, from worse to lousy" the first soldier says in voice-over. The images of "sunny Italy," Joyce-as-Eisenhower continues, were contradicted by deep mud in following the springtime torrents. Images of boots marching through a thick morass follow, and a scene of several jeeps fording an overflowing river.<sup>79</sup>

The weather presented obstacles, but the Germans too put up a resistance. "Every mile we advanced in Italy was won after a stiff fight." Recollections of the difficult terrain are accompanied by shots of advancing columns of infantry struggling down steep mountainsides. "We'd capture one mountainside, and there'd be another one right in front of us." As scenes of G.I.s struggling with the terrain under enemy fire continue, the solider observes "those rocks came in handy. Somehow you felt like you were never down deep enough." Explaining the weapons that the average G.I. had at his disposal, which are then shown in action on screen, "we used everything we had: rifles, BARs [Browning Automatic Rifles], and mortars." There follow several extended scenes of G.I.s in combat. Emphasizing the role and contribution of the average G.I., Eisenhower explains: "The trained American possesses qualities that are almost unique. Because of his initiative and resourcefulness, he becomes, when he has attained a proficiency in all the normal techniques of battle, a most formidable soldier."<sup>80</sup> Eisenhower's words and those of the "average G.I." reminiscing from his hospital room are juxtaposed to give a

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<sup>79</sup> *Crusade in Europe*. "The G.I.: Hero of the War." Directed by Richard de Rochemont (1949; Orland Park, IL: MPI Media Group, 2009), DVD.

<sup>80</sup> *Crusade in Europe*. "The G.I.: Hero of the War." Directed by Richard de Rochemont (1949; Orland Park, IL: MPI Media Group, 2009), DVD; Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe*, 453.

complete picture of the G.I. experience: the perspective of the troops on the ground and their concerns about weather, enemy action, rest and recuperation, combat survival, and morale; and those of the highest echelon of officers, and Eisenhower's own principals about the importance of morale and safety for a modern, mobile fighting force.

Reiterating Eisenhower's praise for the Allied soldier who endured the struggle of the war explained in the episode "Victory's Aftermath." In repurposed newsreel footage from his V-E Day speech, Eisenhower acknowledged that the "truly heroic figure" of the war was "G.I. Joe," the rank and file Allied serviceman (no servicewomen were mentioned) to whom the Supreme Commander had dedicated his book. "He has endured cold, hunger, fatigue. His companion has been danger. Death has dogged his footsteps. He and his platoon commanders have given us an example of loyalty, devotion to duty, and indomitable courage that will live in our hearts as long as we admire those qualities in men."<sup>81</sup> These were the heroes that had defeated the tyrannical Nazi regime and its vaunted war machine and had stood as the bulwark of democracy.

### *After Crusade*

After its initial May to October 1949 run, *Crusade in Europe* aired twice more on the ABC network. Although Time-Life had to sponsor the program during the first airing, for its second airing in 1950, other sponsors were secured in various local markets throughout the country. The series had proved popular with the public – at least enough for advertisers to show interest in sponsoring the films on a co-op basis.<sup>82</sup> The success of

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<sup>81</sup> *Crusade in Europe*. "The G.I.: Hero of the War." Directed by Richard de Rochemont (1949; Orland Park, IL: MPI Media Group, 2009), DVD.

<sup>82</sup> See for example "'Crusade' Sponsors," *Broadcasting*, December 5, 1949, 55; "'Crusade' Returns on TV; Co-op Sponsors Line Up," *Advertising Age*, February 6, 1950, 14.

the series even inspired a sequel. In 1951, the *March of Time* launched *Crusade in the Pacific*, a similar 26-part compilation documentary featuring combat footage from the Pacific theater.

### **Chapter Three: *You Are There***

*What sort of a day was it? A day like all days, filled with those events that alter and illuminate our times. And you were there.*

- Walter Cronkite's *You Are There* sign off

On a Sunday morning at the height of the Second Red Scare – at some point between the 1953 execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg and the 1954 broadcast of Edward R. Murrow's critical profile on Senator Joseph McCarthy on *See It Now* – a klatch of CBS television personnel had gathered at the Pentagon bar across the street from the network's midtown Manhattan studios for a ritual eye-opener a few hours before air time. Sitting at the bar, Murrow, who had become a legend in the business with his broadcasts from London during the Blitz, turned to the producer Charles Russell to congratulate the younger man on his successful new series *You Are There*, a quirky historical drama in which CBS newsmen "covered" landmark events like the signing of the Declaration of Independence or the execution of Socrates as though they were live breaking news stories. "You know Charles," Russell remembered Murrow saying years later, "I watch your program on the control room monitor, whenever possible, before going to air. I admire it." Before turning to leave, Murrow asked with a conspiratorial look, "How do you get away with it?"<sup>1</sup>

What Russell had been getting away with on his otherwise innocent-looking program was, to the astute viewer, a clever use of historical allegory as a way of exploring themes of free expression, civil liberties, civil rights, and principled dissent. At

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Russell, "In the Worst of Times, It Was the Best of Times" (Unpublished manuscript, n.d.), Special Collections & Archives, Oviatt Library, California State University Northridge, 82. The conversation is also recounted in Walter Bernstein, *Inside Out: A Memoir of the Blacklist* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1996), 222. Since Bernstein had been blacklisted at the time, and likely did not attend these Sunday morning rituals, it is probable that his source for the story was Russell himself.

a time of anti-communist witch hunts and virulent paranoia – a time in which CBS was itself denounced in certain circles as the “Communist Broadcasting System” for its high quotient of liberal staffers<sup>2</sup> – these could be risky subjects. Well aware of the power of the mass media to shape public opinion from their experience of wartime propaganda, many Americans in the postwar years had begun to fear the possibility that the channels of public communication might be manipulated by demagogues or political subversives. Some, like the publishers of the anti-Communist newsletter *Counterattack* and the Syracuse supermarket-owner Laurence Johnson, clearly saw such infiltration already at work and pressured corporate sponsors and network executives to purge leftists from the airwaves. In response, the networks, advertising agencies, and sponsors began to maintain lists of suspect individuals who were to be barred from working in the industry due to their demonstrated – or alleged – political affiliations. In the “gestalt of the blacklist,” however, as the historian Thomas Doherty has observed, “categories shifted and anomalies abounded.” Non-Communist leftists, New Deal liberals, and even those expressing vaguely progressive views could be ensnared by over-zealous watchdogs.<sup>3</sup> With CBS operating its own internal investigative apparatus, moreover, it may have appeared as though Russell was playing a dangerous game.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Robert F. Horowitz, “History Comes to Life and ‘You Are There,’” in *American History/American Television*, ed. John E. O’Connor (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1983), 84; Robert Metz, *CBS: Reflections in a Bloodshot Eye* (Chicago: Playboy Press, 1975), 282; “Jack Gould to John Pope,” in *Watching Television Come of Age*, ed. Lewis L. Gould (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002), 71-73. Though each of these authors attributes the phrase to FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, the exact origins of the quote are unclear. Gould, however, notes that the characterization stuck because, at the time, CBS “did employ the most liberals.”

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 30-31; David Everitt, *A Shadow of Red: Communism and the Blacklist in Radio and Television* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2007), 42-70; *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television* (New York: American Business Consultants, 1950).

<sup>4</sup> On the internal CBS loyalty oath, see David Everitt, *A Shadow of Red: Communism and the Blacklist in Radio and Television* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2007), 71-92, 103-104.

Russell's greater transgression, however (though the extent to which Murrow was aware of it is unclear), was that he had secretly employed three blacklisted writers to work on the show: Walter Bernstein, Abraham Polonsky, and Arnold Manoff, each of whom had promising careers in film and television cut short by their (legitimate) past connections to the American Communist Party.<sup>5</sup> With Russell keeping the network at bay, the trio, who called themselves the "Cut-Make-and-Trim Factory," scripted episodes under a series of assumed names fronted by sympathetic friends and family members.<sup>6</sup> In defiance of the blacklist, they eagerly threw themselves into the work, using the show's historical premise to register a muted protest of the McCarthyist terror and the political intolerance that had gripped the nation. Selecting events like the "The Execution of Joan of Arc," "The Death of Socrates," "The First Salem Witch Trial," or "The Ordeal of Galileo" for dramatic reenactment on *You Are There* provided ready-made allegories for the anti-Communist hysteria that had gripped the nation in the early 1950s, and which had such devastating consequences on the lives and careers of the series' principle writers. "We tried our best," recalled Bernstein in his 1996 memoir *Inside Out*, "to celebrate the human spirit, to show the forces that throughout history tried to stunt and oppress that spirit, to explain as clearly as we could its victories and its defeats."<sup>7</sup> At a

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<sup>5</sup> Of the three, only Bernstein had been listed in *Red Channels* for his involvement with several left-leaning organizations and publications; *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television* (New York: American Business Consultants, 1950), 17-18. As will be related below, Polonsky and Manoff, meanwhile, had both been identified as members of the Communist Party before HUAC by former associates.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Russell, "In the Worst of Times, It Was the Best of Times" (Unpublished manuscript, n.d.), Special Collections & Archives, Oviatt Library, California State University Northridge, 53-54. A list of 55 Factory-scripted episodes appears in Appendix II of Abraham Polonsky, 'You Are There' Teleplays: The Critical Edition, ed. John Schultheiss and Mark Schaubert (Northridge, CA: The Center for Telecommunication Studies, California State University, 2003), 318-321. Acknowledging the difficulty of attributing credits for specific episodes under the conditions of the blacklist, the editors do not include in their list episode credits "for which documentation is sketchy or non-existent."

<sup>7</sup> Walter Bernstein, *Inside Out: A Memoir of the Blacklist* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 222.



time when their private political beliefs had made them pariahs, the three men hid in plain sight, conducting what Polonsky would later call “guerilla warfare” against McCarthyism through an award-winning and critically acclaimed television show.<sup>8</sup>

Still, as Bernstein and Polonsky would insist over the years (Manoff died in 1965 without revealing much publicly about his own involvement with the series), Factory-scripted episodes never consciously interpreted the facts of history to suit a preconceived ideological agenda. “It was all a matter of selection. We never tried to shape history to prove a political point,” wrote Bernstein years later, “what was important was the subject matter.”<sup>9</sup> Echoing this sentiment in a 1989 interview with film scholar John Schultheiss, Polonsky insisted that what the three writers were doing with *You Are There* was not propaganda, which manipulated facts to fit a specific message, but “political interpretation,” in which meaning was made to “dramatically flow out of the natural historical conflict that existed.”<sup>10</sup> This may be a fine distinction. But both the writers and Russell credited *You Are There*’s painstaking research and conscientious adherence to historical fact forestalled objections from the network or from the show’s sponsors.

This political interpretation didn’t rest solely on the creation of anti-Communist allegories, however. Indeed, of the 55 episodes that can be attributed to Polonsky, Bernstein, or Manoff, only about a half-dozen readily suggested such interpretation. Rather, many of the Factory’s scripts, including those with pronounced anti-anti-

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew Dickos, Ed., *Abraham Polonsky: Interviews* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 126.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Bernstein, *Inside Out: A Memoir of the Blacklist* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 222.

<sup>10</sup> Polonsky quoted in John Schultheiss, “A Season of Fear: Abraham Polonsky, ‘You Are There,’ and the Blacklist” in John Schultheiss and Mark Schaubert (eds.), *‘You Are There’ Teleplays: The Critical Edition* (Northridge, CA: The Center for Telecommunication Studies, 2003), 13.

Communist themes, focused more on historical conflict – on presenting events in a way that addressed multiple sides and perspectives, and which resisted easy moral judgments.

### *CBS Is There*

The idea to transport CBS newsmen back in time to cover historical events as if they were breaking news had first been developed in the late-1940s as the premise for a radio series by the comedian Goodman Ace, who had been hired by the network to strengthen its comedic programming. As his friend, the CBS producer-director Robert Louis Shayon later recalled, the cigar-chomping “Goodie” strolled into his office one day with an unusual pitch involving the American Revolution and an anachronistic CBS newsmen: “Suppose you had a microphone in the room when the Declaration of Independence was signed,” Ace suggested, “and the announcer said: ‘Here we are at the signing of this famous document.’” Shayon was intrigued. “It would not only make a great show, it’s a great idea for a series,” he recalled saying. “We could do all the famous events in world history.” The two writers began to extemporize on the concept. “How about Abraham Lincoln,” Ace mused, “at Ford’s Theater ... CBS Is There.”<sup>11</sup>

After a few days, Shayon and Ace had worked up a proposal and pitched the show to network executives, including the Vice President for Programming Davidson Taylor, and Edward R. Murrow, then serving a stint as the network’s vice president for public affairs. The writers were disappointed. Certain that network chief William S. Paley wouldn’t like the idea, Taylor summarily rejected the proposal, while for his part, Murrow was concerned that the news division’s credibility would suffer if its reporters

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<sup>11</sup> Robert Louis Shayon, *Odyssey in Prime Time: A Life in Twentieth Century Media* (Philadelphia: Waymark Press, 2001), 110-111; Goodman Ace, “I Was There,” *Saturday Review* September 20, 1969, 6.

participated in a dramatic program. He thought Shayon and Ace should use actors.<sup>12</sup>

Undeterred, Shayon and Ace produced a pilot episode on the assassination of Abraham Lincoln and shared the recording with the influential *Herald-Tribune* radio critic John Crosby. Impressed with the “audition” program, Crosby wrote a favorable review, reporting that the show presented a “novel experiment” that “packs a genuine wallop.”<sup>13</sup> According to one version of the story, when this too failed to convince the network brass, Ace seized on an opportunity to pitch the show directly to Paley himself at a meeting in which the programming director was also present. After hearing the pitch, Paley turned to Taylor and asked, “Why aren’t we doing that?” Caught flat-footed, Taylor assured the boss, “Oh, we’re going to.”<sup>14</sup>

With final approval from on high, radio’s *CBS Is There* premiered as a summer replacement series in July 1947 to generally positive reviews.<sup>15</sup> As an imaginative and entertaining spin on a public affairs program, moreover, *CBS Is There* was a particularly well-timed addition to the network lineup. In the immediate postwar period, broadcasters had faced mounting criticism from activists, public officials, and ordinary listeners who objected to what they perceived to be the excessive commercialization of the airwaves. Responding to calls for media reform, the Federal Communication Commission had issued a devastating report in March 1946 (the so-called “Blue Book”), which took broadcasters to task for failing to meet their public service obligations. While some in the industry (predictably) railed at the report and its authors, CBS embarked on a much-

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<sup>12</sup> Goodman Ace, “I Was There,” *Saturday Review*, September 20, 1969, 6.

<sup>13</sup> John Crosby, “A New Slant on History,” *New York Herald-Tribune*, April 22, 1947, 20.

<sup>14</sup> This version is reported in Robert Metz, *CBS: Reflections in a Bloodshot Eye* (Chicago: Playboy Press, 1975), 131-134. Metz

<sup>15</sup> See R.W. Stewart, “New Type of Historical Drama on CBS,” *New York Times*, July 13, 1947, 55; “CBS Is There,” *Variety*, July 9, 1947, 72; Jerry Franken, “CBS Is There,” *Billboard*, July 19, 1947, 15.

publicized initiative to develop, as Paley put it, “new and sparkling ideas in the presentation of educational, documentary, and controversial issues.”<sup>16</sup> Under the direction of Murrow, the network’s newly created Documentary Unit produced a slate of programs on pressing social issues, such as the national health, venereal disease, atomic energy, aging, and race relations.<sup>17</sup>

By the late 1940s, CBS had already earned a reputation as an innovator of in the field of news and information programming. Its coverage of the German annexation of Austria in the spring of 1938 – in which Murrow, then CBS European news director, and anchorman Robert Trout had led an ad-hoc team of correspondents in European capitals in a roundup of late-breaking news via shortwave radio – had been the first of its kind.<sup>18</sup> Two years later, Murrow’s reports during the Battle of Britain would make the broadcaster a household name in the United States, and would artfully demonstrate the possibilities for radio journalism as a form of social documentary. Rather than relaying the bare facts of the German air raids on London, Murrow had combined subjective observation with on-the-spot recordings of bomb blasts, anti-aircraft fire, and the sounds of Londoners calmly walking to neighborhood air shelters in a way that had created a

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<sup>16</sup> Paley quoted in Matthew C. Ehrlich, “‘All Things Are As They Were Then’: Radio’s ‘You Are There,’” *American Journalism* 28, no. 1: 13. The original quotation appears in “Paley’s Primer on Programming,” *Variety*, October 23, 1946, 90. On the FCC Blue Book, its reception, and ultimate failure, see Victor Pickard, *America’s Battle for Media Democracy: The Triumph of Corporate Libertarianism and the Future of Media Reform* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 62-97; *Public Service Responsibility of Broadcast Licensees* (Washington, D.C.: Federal Communications Commission, 1946).

<sup>17</sup> Matthew C. Ehrlich, “‘All Things Are as They Were Then’: Radio’s ‘You Are There,’” *American Journalism* 28, no. 1: 13; A. William Bluem, *Documentary in American Television: Form, Function, Method* (New York: Hastings House, 1965), 66-69; A.M. Sperber, *Murrow: His Life and Times* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 259-275.

<sup>18</sup> See Donald G. Godfrey, “CBS World News Roundup: Setting the Stage for the Next Half Century,” *American Journalism*, 7, no. 3 (1990): 164-172; Edward J. Bliss, *Now the News: The Story of Broadcast Journalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 71-75; Erik Barnouw, *The Golden Web: A History of Broadcasting in the United States*. Volume II (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 76-83.

sense of immediacy and intimacy for his listeners. While many Americans in 1940 might have preferred to stay out of the European war (see chapter 2), Murrow's broadcasts had established an emotional connection between the home audience and the embattled British and helped to cement loyalty between the two nations.<sup>19</sup> As the poet Archibald MacLeish would later aver, Murrow's broadcasts had done much to dispel "the ignorant superstition that violence and lies and murder on another continent are not violence and lies and murder here."<sup>20</sup>

The idea that radio documentary could be used to inform, to advocate, and to persuade instilled many young writers and directors, including Shayon, with an idealistic vision of the medium's capacities as a force for progressive renewal of postwar social life. Living through the Depression years, Shayon would recall later, had made many of his generation "sensitive and sympathetic to justice, to social 'causes,' and reform," and there was a sense of optimism among his colleagues at CBS that radio would be a key medium for "addressing the serious problems of the postwar world."<sup>21</sup> Such an opportunity arose in 1946, when Shayon was assigned to write and direct *Operation Crossroads*, an hour-long program on the atom bomb. Its success, together with growing pressure from regulators and reformers, helped to persuade the network brass to establish a special Documentary Unit under the auspices of Murrow's Department of Public Affairs – the first of its kind in American radio. Shayon would get the debut production. *The Eagle's Brood*, a report on juvenile delinquency across the country, scored another hit for the network, and convinced Shayon that American listeners were "hungry for the

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<sup>19</sup> William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 84-91; Edward R. Murrow, *This is London*, ed. Elmer Davis (Simon and Schuster, 1941).

<sup>20</sup> Archibald MacLeish, *A Time to Act: Selected Addresses* (Freeport, NY: Books for Library Press, 1970).

<sup>21</sup> Robert Lewis Shayon, *Odyssey in Prime Time: A Life in Twentieth Century Media*, 12, 90.

serious use of radio as an instrument for addressing important social issues with all its creative and financial resources in a powerful manner.”<sup>22</sup>

It wasn't too long after *The Eagle's Brood* that Ace turned up in Shayon's office with the idea for *CBS Is There*. As the historian Matthew C. Ehrlich has shown, it was developed in much the same spirit as the Documentary Unit's other programs.<sup>23</sup> Much like the reenactments of news events staged by *The March of Time* (which had been carried by CBS from 1931-1937), its use of dramatizations was typical of documentary prior to the widespread availability of magnetic tape recording. Indeed, for *The Eagle's Brood*, Shayon had cast a number of actors to play key roles, including the film star Luther Adler, who would portray the community organizer Saul Alinsky. When combined with a punchy script, narration, music, and sound effects, documentary reenactments “could create a distinct kind of reality in the mind of the listener,” and which could “change attitudes, broaden philosophies, and outlooks,” observes media researcher William Bluem.<sup>24</sup> What was important was not so much that reality was directly recorded, but that it was authentically represented and accepted as such by the listening audience.

To convey this level of realism on *CBS Is There*, Shayon and his staff conducted extensive historical research on the events and personages featured in each episode – a point that was reiterated at the top of each program by a CBS announcer, who confirmed

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<sup>22</sup> Robert Lewis Shayon, *Odyssey in Prime Time: A Life in Twentieth Century Media*, 101-109; Matthew C. Ehrlich, *Radio Utopia: Postwar Audio Documentary in the Public Interest* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press), 51-56.

<sup>23</sup> Matthew C. Ehrlich, “‘All Things Are As They Were Then’: Radio's ‘You Are There,’” *American Journalism* 28, no. 1: 13. See also Matthew C. Ehrlich, *Radio Utopia: Postwar Audio Documentary in the Public Interest* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press), 93-103.

<sup>24</sup> A. William Bluem, *Documentary in American Television: Form, Function, Method* (New York: Hastings House, 1965), 60, 62.

that the dramatic presentation was “based on authentic historical fact and quotation.”<sup>25</sup> In preparation for the debut installment on the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, for example, Shayon remembered traveling down to Washington D.C. to read up on the end of the Civil War at the Library of Congress and to pay a visit to Ford’s Theater. Later in the series, writers were dispatched to Gettysburg, Salem, Massachusetts, and even Haiti.<sup>26</sup> “I insisted on accuracy of detail,” remembered Shayon.<sup>27</sup> Historical accuracy also played a part in deciding which historical events the show would cover. For Shayon, it was important that every event was something that radio would have covered had the technology existed at the time. “We would never do an event where the presence of the microphone or electronic communication would actually interfere with or influence the outcome of the event,” he recalled in his autobiography. “That is why the announcer, at the start of every program, said: ‘All things are as they were then, except for one thing – CBS Is There.’”<sup>28</sup>

To set the stage of listeners’ imagination, Shayon also encouraged his crew to experiment with a range of acoustical techniques that heightened the sense of immediacy. “We were all technically very ambitious and considered ourselves virtuosos,” Shayon recalled in a 1986 interview, “we sneered at a one-mike or two-mike show – you had to have eight, ten mikes.” Produced at the cavernous Liederkrantz Hall, an old German singing society-turned CBS studio, Shayon and his crew had plenty of space in which to work. They rigged microphones all over the building in order to create unusual and

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<sup>25</sup> Most episodes of the *CBS Is There/You Are There* radio series can be found online at [https://archive.org/details/You\\_Are\\_There\\_OTR/](https://archive.org/details/You_Are_There_OTR/). See also “CBS is There/You Are There,” Digital Deli Online, accessed July 3, 2018, <http://www.digitaldeliftp.com/DigitalDeliToo/dd2jb-CBS-Is-There.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Matthew C. Ehrlich, “‘All Things Are As They Were Then’: Radio’s ‘You Are There,’” *American Journalism* 28, no. 1: 19.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Lewis Shayon, *Odyssey in Prime Time: A Life in Twentieth Century Media*, 111, 113.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Lewis Shayon, *Odyssey in Prime Time: A Life in Twentieth Century Media*, 113.

elaborate sound effects – up in the high open ceiling, in the basement lavatory, in storage rooms, sound-proof booths, and echo chambers, “anywhere we could get an effect of a change in scene.” Meanwhile, audio engineers would play with various filters and equalizers in order to mimic the various effects that one might hear during a live news broadcast: ambient sound, crowd noise, lower-quality connection for remote correspondents, early tape recordings, signal disruptions and interference.<sup>29</sup>

The sense of being transported back to a “breaking news” event in the past was further heightened by the use of actual CBS newscasters, rather than actors. Despite the initial objections of Murrow and others in the CBS News hierarchy, John Daly, Ned Calmer, Don Hollenbeck, Douglas Edwards, Harry Marble, Richard C. Hottelet, and others all played themselves in the series, lending an air of credibility and prestige to the *CBS Is There* “coverage.” These were familiar, trusted, and “authoritative voices” in the mediascape of the late 1940s, explained Shayon, and listeners knew from daily experience that these men “deal[t] with real life.” Moreover, *CBS Is There* tried as closely as possible to mimic the protocols and procedures of established broadcast news, conferring, when necessary, with representatives of the CBS News staff to ensure the accuracy of their dramatizations.<sup>30</sup> This level of realism, however, troubled Shayon’s boss Davidson Taylor, who had been involved in the production of Orson Welles’ *The War of The Worlds* broadcast in 1938 and was particularly sensitive to the ways in which radio audiences might misinterpret *CBS Is There* dramatizations, mistaking them for

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<sup>29</sup> Robert Lewis Shayon, interview by Robert Midgett, in *Five Directors: The Golden Years of Radio*, ed. Ira Skutch (Lanham, MA: The Scarecrow Press, 1998), 177; Robert Lewis Shayon, *Odyssey in Prime Time: A Life in Twentieth Century Media*, 116.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Lewis Shayon, interview by Robert Midgett, in *Five Directors: The Golden Years of Radio*, ed. Ira Skutch (Lanham, MA: The Scarecrow Press, 1998), 178; Robert Lewis Shayon, *Odyssey in Prime Time: A Life in Twentieth Century Media*, 113.



actual breaking news events. As Shayon remembered, Taylor was particularly concerned about “The Last Days of Pompeii,” in which veteran CBS newscasters would be describing the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in horrific detail. In order to forestall mass panic, Shayon agreed that the date (the year of Emperor Trajan, 46 AD) would be constantly mentioned throughout the broadcast as a signal to the audience that they were listening to a recreation. Still, despite these efforts, Shayon recalled the CBS switchboard lighting up during the broadcast with frantic callers who thought Vesuvius was actually erupting and that Naples was in danger.<sup>31</sup>

For most reviewers, however, the application of contemporary techniques of broadcast journalism to historical reenactment had produced an engaging and entertaining listening experience. “The trick of using veteran newsmen, who have learned to face any disaster with dry, unharried competence, adds immeasurably to the authenticity of the program,” wrote Crosby in his early review. For others, the *CBS Is There* performances “gained startling reality,” “an ambitious undertaking” that was “endowed with the unpedantic advantage of being dramatically entertaining.”<sup>32</sup> Under Shayon’s leadership, the program went on to win a Peabody and a Radio-Television Critics’ Circle award for best educational documentary.<sup>33</sup> Still, the program’s anachronistic premise and the participation of respected CBS newscasters in a dramatic program didn’t gel with everyone. For at least one critic, the absurdity of John Daly or Harry Marble travelling

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<sup>31</sup> Robert Lewis Shayon, interview by Robert Midgett, in *Five Directors: The Golden Years of Radio*, ed. Ira Skutch (Lanham, MA: The Scarecrow Press, 1998), 179.

<sup>32</sup> John Crosby, “A New Slant on History,” *New York Herald-Tribune*, April 22, 1947, 20; Jerry Franken, “CBS Is There,” *Billboard*, July 19, 1947, 15; “CBS is There,” *Variety*, July 9, 1947, 72; R.W. Stewart, “Programs in Review,” *New York Times*, July 13, 1947, 55.

<sup>33</sup> “CBS Is There (CBS),” The Peabody Awards, accessed July 2, 2018, <http://www.peabodyawards.com/award-profile/cbs-is-there>; Robert Lewis Shayon, *Odyssey in Prime Time: A Life in Twentieth Century Media*, 119; “The News of Radio,” *The New York Times*, May 17, 1948, 38.

back through time was too tempting a target for parody.<sup>34</sup> And much to Shayon's disappointment (he was an admirer), the influential *Harper's* magazine columnist Bernard DeVoto declared the show a "flop," a victim of its own "phoniness." Bearing out Murrow's initial concerns about using actual CBS newscasters in the show, DeVoto wrote that "the lethal overdose is John Daly. We have heard his voice vibrate with real emotion in the presence of actual events occurring before his eyes, and our memory of the real simply turns the imagined into ham."<sup>35</sup> For some, it would seem, the realism of *CBS Is There* was a little too real.

Though such criticisms may have stung at the time, Shayon was assured of the series' artistic value and its potential political impact. Well before the television adaptation pictured the past as terrain for subversive allegory, Shayon was choosing historical subject matter "with some meaning for our time," by which listeners might "see more clearly the relationship between past and present." These were shows, as he would proudly recall later, with "political bite."<sup>36</sup> As Erik Christiansen has pointed out, however, until recently the early subversive work of *CBS Is There* has largely been overlooked by historians and biographers focusing on the later TV program and its blacklisted writers. "Perhaps," Christiansen opines of this omission, "it takes away from the 'revolutionary' story the television writers and their biographers prefer to remember."<sup>37</sup> To be fair, though the Hollywood blacklist ran contemporaneously with

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<sup>34</sup> See also René MacColl, "Eardrums Along the Mohawk," *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1948, 92-94.

<sup>35</sup> Bernard DeVoto, "The Easy Chair," *Harper's Monthly*, September 1947, 247-250. Shayon expresses his disappointment with this review in *Odyssey in Prime Time: A Life in Twentieth Century Media* (Philadelphia: Waymark Press, 2001), 114-115.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Lewis Shayon, *Odyssey in Prime Time: A Life in Twentieth Century Media*, 119.

<sup>37</sup> Erik Christiansen, *Channeling the Past: Politicizing History in Postwar America* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press), 106. In particular, Christiansen cites the blacklist historians Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner, as well as Walter Bernstein for this oversight: Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner, *A Very Dangerous Citizen: Abraham Polonsky and the American Left* (Berkeley, CA: University of California

*CBS Is There*, and though Shayon would find himself the target of anti-Communist scrutiny (more on this below), Shayon and his team of writers – unlike the Factory – were working in the open. Still, Christiansen is correct in pointing out that several of the more celebrated political allegories staged by the TV series – “The Witchcraft Trials at Salem,” “Joan of Arc Faces the Stake,” and “The Death of Socrates,” for example – weren’t invented at the time, but had first been produced for radio.

That several of these episodes had “some meaning for our time,” as Shayon put it, was not lost on contemporary listeners. For instance, in “The Death of Socrates,” which originally aired a few months after the House Un-American Activities Committee conducted its first hearings on alleged communist activity in Hollywood, CBS transported its listeners back to that dramatic moment in 399 BCE, “when one of the most enlightened democracies on earth trembled at the brink of a cup of poison.” Picking up on the contemporary resonances of the program, the radio critic John Crosby noted that Plato’s argument, “that Aristophanes had lost faith in the processes of democracy ... can be heard today.” Like the United States in the late 1940s, Athens in the early fourth century had just been through a devastating war (the Peloponnesian War, which it had lost to Sparta and its allies). According to CBS’s Plato, “fear runs high among us; we are confused, desperate, and so we seek someone to blame and sacrifice.” It was not the democratic system that condemned Socrates, Plato insisted, but “the prejudice of old men.”<sup>38</sup> Such statements, Crosby noted “might easily be applied to the hysteria behind

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Press, 2001), 174; Walter Bernstein, *Inside Out: A Memoir of the Blacklist* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 218.

<sup>38</sup> Joseph Liss and Robert Lewis Shayon, “The Death of Socrates,” March 14, 1948, in *CBS Is There*, produced by CBS, digital audio recording, 29:07, accessed July 3, 2018, [https://archive.org/details/You\\_Are\\_There\\_OTR/You\\_Are\\_There\\_480314\\_ep22\\_The\\_Death\\_of\\_Socrates.mp3](https://archive.org/details/You_Are_There_OTR/You_Are_There_480314_ep22_The_Death_of_Socrates.mp3)

our current witch hunts.”<sup>39</sup> So too could the main source of tragedy in the story: If only Socrates would “save himself” by renouncing his beliefs (turning “friendly witness” in the parlance of the blacklist), he would be spared the hemlock.

The metaphor of the witch hunt would have been even more obvious in the *CBS Is There* broadcast of “The Witchcraft Trials at Salem,” which aired in July 1947 as HUAC began to conduct investigations of alleged communist activities within the motion picture industry.<sup>40</sup> In the episode, Daly reports from the Salem court of Massachusetts Bay province in 1692 as the witchcraft trial of Rebecca Nourse breaks for a short recess. After describing an unprecedented “roundup” of 150 local residents suspected of witchcraft, Daly reports that a prosecution witness, the Reverend Samuel Parris, had that morning testified that Nourse’s witchcraft was “actually part of a much larger plot against the government.” When asked for a comment, Parris adds that “if that plot had not been discovered, the plotters would soon have succeeded in sinking this government ... and set up instead their own diabolism.” The charge echoed across the centuries, evoking parallels to, among others, those leveled by J. Edgar Hoover in his testimony to HUAC, warning that the American Communist Party was a dangerous “fifth column,” whose objective was “the overthrow of our government.”<sup>41</sup> It was a line often repeated by contemporary anti-Communists. Later, when Nourse is adjudged innocent by a jury of her peers, community leaders connive to reverse the decision based on their own political self-interest. Eventually, Rebecca Nourse is found guilty, and sadly, as the announcer

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<sup>39</sup> John Crosby, “CBS at Runnymede,” *New York Herald Tribune*, April 19, 1948, 16. See also Matthew C. Ehrlich, *Radio Utopia: Postwar Audio Documentary in the Public Interest* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press), 99.

<sup>40</sup> Larry Ceplair, *Anti-Communism in Twentieth Century America: A Critical History* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger), 79-85.

<sup>41</sup> Hoover quoted in Samuel A. Tower, “FBI Head Brands Communist Party a ‘Fifth Column,’” *New York Times*, March 27, 1947, 1.

informs us, “the witch hunt goes on.”<sup>42</sup> As Christiansen has noted, “substitute ‘United States’ for ‘Salem/New England,’ and ‘communism’ for ‘Satan/Devil,’ and Daly paints a disturbingly accurate picture of how contemporary American society’s fears and concerns could foster paranoia.”<sup>43</sup>

As both Christiansen and Ehrlich have in their analyses discussed other episodes in the series with resonant political themes – “The Surrender of Sitting Bull” and the acknowledgement of the brutality of U.S. Indian removal policies; “The Battle of Plassey” and the waning of British Imperialism; “The Dreyfus Case” and anti-Semitism; “The Betrayal of Toussaint l’Ouverture” and contemporary race relations.<sup>44</sup> The larger point, however, is that the radio version of the program had produced critical interpretations of the past that resisted easy mythologies or consensus versions of the past.

Though *CBS Is There* earned the praise of critics and the support of listeners – thousands of whom wrote the network to save the show from early cancellation after the first summer replacement series ended – it was never able to attract a sponsor.<sup>45</sup> Even after CBS brass decided to change the title of the series to *You Are There* in order to downplay the network association, the series remained unsalable.<sup>46</sup> Meanwhile, expenses

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<sup>42</sup> Sylvia Berger and Robert Lewis Shayon, “The Death of Socrates,” March 14, 1948, in *CBS Is There*, produced by CBS, digital audio recording, 29:07, accessed July 3, 2018, [https://archive.org/details/You\\_Are\\_There\\_OTR/You\\_Are\\_There\\_480104\\_ep12\\_Witchcraft\\_Trials\\_at\\_Salem.mp3](https://archive.org/details/You_Are_There_OTR/You_Are_There_480104_ep12_Witchcraft_Trials_at_Salem.mp3)

<sup>43</sup> Erik Christiansen, *Channeling the Past: Politicizing History in Postwar America* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press), 109.

<sup>44</sup> Erik Christiansen, *Channeling the Past: Politicizing History in Postwar America* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press), 106-111; Matthew C. Ehrlich, *Radio Utopia: Postwar Audio Documentary in the Public Interest* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press), 97-100.

<sup>45</sup> “‘CBS Is There’ Comes Back Through Public Demand,” *Variety*, October 8, 1947.

<sup>46</sup> Matthew C. Ehrlich, *Radio Utopia: Postwar Audio Documentary and the Public Interest* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press), 95; “‘CBS Is There’ Comes Back Through Public Demand, Teeing Off This Month,” *Variety*, October 8, 1947; “One Thing and Another,” *New York Times*, May 2, 1948, 89.

continued to mount. By its 1948-49 season, the series required a whole team of researchers, production techs, and staffers who were assigned exclusively to the show. Within the CBS Documentary Unit, *You Are There* had become its own division. Eventually, in a spate of corporate streamlining prompted by the network's expanding investment in television, CBS scaled the series down to a once-a-month schedule and axed Shayon along with two other long-time writers.<sup>47</sup>

Corporate retrenchment was at least the official reason given for Shayon's departure. At a cost of \$2,000 to \$2,900 per episode, *You Are There* was certainly expensive for a sustaining program of its time.<sup>48</sup> But in his autobiography, Shayon wondered whether his ouster could have been a result of the increasing scrutiny on broadcast personnel associated with left-leaning organizations and causes. Though more liberal than leftist, Shayon had been an officer of the Radio Directors Guild, and an active member of the Progressive Citizens of America. In the context of the Second Red Scare, this was enough to raise eyebrows. Eventually, his name was listed in *Red Channels*.<sup>49</sup>

*You Are There* continued for a time on a once-a-month basis under its new director Werner Michel, before its cancellation in the summer of 1950. Just a few months before its demise, however, Michel had approached Sig Mickleleson, president of CBS News, with a proposal for adapting the series to television. At a projected cost of \$7,325 per episode for casting, set construction, and costuming (all things that weren't required for radio), the adaptation would cost nearly triple the average cost of the radio program.

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<sup>47</sup> "CBS Streamlining Axes Shayon, Six Asst. Directors," *Variety*, July 6, 1979; "CBS Saving \$111,000 In Its Lopping Off of 'You Are There' Series," *Variety*, July 13, 1949.

<sup>48</sup> Matthew C. Ehrlich, *Radio Utopia: Postwar Audio Documentary and the Public Interest* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press), 100.

<sup>49</sup> *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television* (New York: American Business Consultants, 1950), 135; Robert Lewis Shayon, interview by Robert Midgett, in *Five Directors: The Golden Years of Radio*, ed. Ira Skutch (Lanham, MA: The Scarecrow Press, 1998), 182-183.

But like its predecessor, Michel conceived such an adaptation as a prestige program, but, if done correctly, one that would be salable and “silence the numerous critics of present-day television.”<sup>50</sup> Perhaps unwilling to take the risk, the network sat on the proposal for over two years! When the series finally did come to television, it was a production of the CBS entertainment division, rather than the news division.

### *The Factory*

One day in late 1952, Charles Russell, who was then producing of the half-hour CBS television melodrama *Danger*, bumped into his colleague Bill Dozier on the street in New York. Just back from Hollywood, where he had been a producer at Paramount, Dozier had been named executive producer of dramatic programming at CBS, and he invited Russell to lunch to discuss his interest in taking on the network’s new dramatic series, *You Are There*. Sensing that Dozier wanted support in his new position – and genuinely enthusiastic about the project – Russell agreed. Over lunch, the two men sketched out a few basic ideas about how the program might be formatted for the new visual medium. Like Shayon’s original radio program, TV’s *You Are There* would utilize CBS newsmen to “cover” historical events as if they were live breaking news, but there was the obvious anachronistic problem of having broadcast journalists with modern dress and equipment inserted into scenes alongside historical figures (eventually they decided that the newsmen wouldn’t appear at all, and that historical interviewees would address the camera itself). To host the show, however, Dozier had in mind the network’s Chief Washington Correspondent Walter Cronkite, whose recent coverage of the 1952

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<sup>50</sup> Werner Michel to Sig Mickelson, May 8, 1950, box 1, folder 20, Sig Mickelson Papers, Manuscript Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society.

presidential election season had made him the CBS News Division's breakout star (Cronkite was not yet the anchor of the CBS Evening News).

As for writers, Russell knew where he might find a few – though he would keep their identities mum. For nearly a year, he had been secretly employing three blacklisted writers, Walter Bernstein, Abraham Polonsky, and Arnold Manoff on *Danger*, and he invited them out to lunch at New York's Sea Food Grotto to gauge their interest in the new project. According to Russell, all three fondly remembered the *You Are There* radio series, but when asked about a possible television adaptation, all three demurred. "Absolutely not," said Polonsky; "There are too many problems involved," objected Manoff; "I think it's a terrible idea," Bernstein opined. But when Russell asked the writers if they wanted a job, attitudes around the table quickly changed.<sup>51</sup>

By 1952, the three blacklisted writers had been scraping by a precarious livelihood working under assumed names as scriptwriters for television. Each of them had seen promising careers evaporate in the overheated atmosphere of the postwar Red Scare. Each felt that they had been betrayed by former friends and associates who had named names to HUAC, or had cut ties when certain private political beliefs became unpopular. Each of them had been publicly identified as Reds, but each was determined to defy the blacklist.

Walter Bernstein had joined the Party shortly after his discharge from the Army at the end of World War II. As he would recall in his memoirs, the move seemed natural at the time. As a reporter for *Yank* during the war, he had travelled to Yugoslavia to interview Marshal Tito (he was the first Western journalist to do so), and later spent time

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<sup>51</sup> Charles Russell, "In the Worst of Times, It Was the Best of Times" (Unpublished manuscript, n.d.), Special Collections & Archives, Oviatt Library, California State University Northridge, 1-2.



with partisan units in Italy. The experience had shown him that the European Communists were leading the fight against fascism, and against the social injustices of racism and colonialism. “They had dared and sacrificed the most,” he wrote admiringly, and “they had a moral position ... a vision of a better, more humane world.”<sup>52</sup>

After the war, Bernstein briefly went back to write for the *New Yorker*, where he had spent some time between graduating from Dartmouth and joining the Army. His heart, however, had always been in movies. So in 1947, he moved to Hollywood on a short contract to write for Robert Rossen (who had just directed Polonsky’s *Body and Soul*) at Columbia. During his six month stint, Bernstein learned the craft from Rossen and, in his leisure time, hung around with Manoff, Polonsky, and the other Communist Party members in their circle. When he eventually returned to New York, he got a job writing for *Danger* with the help of his friend Martin Ritt, who produced the series with director Yul Brenner. When Ritt and Brenner left the show to pursue acting full time (Brenner went on to perform brilliantly in the Rodgers and Hammerstein production of *The King and I*), Bernstein stayed on and became close with their replacements, Charles Russell and the director Sidney Lumet.<sup>53</sup>

As Bernstein was turning in scripts for Russell and *Danger*, however, the anti-Red vigilantism that had eviscerated Hollywood in the late-1940s was beginning to expand to the broadcast industry. Though Bernstein had at first (naïvely) that he would remained untouched, that American values of free speech and individual rights were too deeply

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<sup>52</sup> Walter Bernstein, *Inside Out: A Memoir of the Blacklist* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1996), 134. See also Walter Bernstein, interview by Pat McGilligan, in *Backstory 3: Interviews with Screenwriters of the 1960s*, ed. Pat McGilligan (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1997), 91.

<sup>53</sup> Walter Bernstein, interview by Pat McGilligan, in *Backstory 3: Interviews with Screenwriters of the 1960s*, ed. Pat McGilligan (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1997), 94.

rooted to permit mass fear and paranoia, before long he began to feel the current turn against him. At first, the use of a pseudonym was suggested by his agent only as a precaution, and he was still able to submit *Danger* scripts under his own name. Even after his name appeared in *Red Channels* in June 1950, Bernstein still scripted episodes for Russell.<sup>54</sup> Eventually, however, the CBS hierarchy became uncomfortable employing an unrepentant Communist and vocal opponent of the blacklist, and it was gently suggested to Russell that he look for other writers.<sup>55</sup>

Though Russell was apolitical himself, he abhorred the blacklist and wanted to remain loyal to his friend. At great risk to his own career, he encouraged Bernstein to continue to submit *Danger* scripts under a pseudonym (Bernstein chose the name Paul Bauman from the phone book).<sup>56</sup> The arrangement lasted for a while, until CBS executives – who were both impressed by “Bauman’s” work and increasingly suspicious that blacklisted personnel were continuing to work on network shows – demanded that Russell bring his new writer in for conferences, rehearsals, and shooting. Unable to find an actor willing to play Bauman for the network’s benefit, Russell and Bernstein concocted a story in which the writer had succumbed to a rare and fatal disease while seeking treatment in a Swiss hospital. This seemed to convince Russell’s bosses for the time being, but going forward, Bernstein would have to find sympathetic friends and

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<sup>54</sup> For a list of *Danger* episodes scripted by Polonsky, Bernstein, and Manoff, see Appendix I of Abraham Polonsky, ‘You Are There’ Teleplays: The Critical Edition, ed. John Schultheiss and Mark Schaubert (Northridge, CA: The Center for Telecommunication Studies, California State University, 2003), 315-317.

<sup>55</sup> Charles Russell, “In the Worst of Times, It Was the Best of Times” (Unpublished manuscript, n.d.), Special Collections & Archives, Oviatt Library, California State University Northridge, 21. During this period, Bernstein edited the newsletter *Facts About the Blacklist*, and it may have been this public repudiation that finally ended his career at CBS.

<sup>56</sup> Charles Russell, “In the Worst of Times, It Was the Best of Times” (Unpublished manuscript, n.d.), Special Collections & Archives, Oviatt Library, California State University Northridge, 21-22; Walter Bernstein, *Inside Out: A Memoir of the Blacklist* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1996), 21-27, 150-152.

acquaintances willing to both front their names and appear in person when necessary. It was a risk that few were willing to take.

Meanwhile, as Bernstein was juggling fronts for *Danger*, he was regularly meeting with his old Hollywood comrades Arnold Manoff and Abraham Polonsky at an Upper West Side luncheonette to pool their resources. Like Bernstein, both Manoff and Polonsky had been blacklisted, and both were looking for work. A handsome and tanned writer with prematurely white hair, Manoff had returned to New York in 1950 when his short story, “All You Need is One Good Break,” was adapted on Broadway. Though it had been successful as a one-act play staged by the Actor’s Laboratory Theater in Hollywood, it proved a disappointment as a full-length production and closed within a few days.<sup>57</sup> Having only achieved moderate success as a screenwriter, Manoff stayed on the East Coast in the hopes of finding more work writing for the stage. In the meantime, he was identified by former friends and associates as a leading member of the Hollywood branch of the Communist Party during the HUAC investigations into alleged infiltration of the film colony.<sup>58</sup>

Of the three writers, however, it was Abraham Lincoln Polonsky who was most aggressively pursued by the anti-Communist crusaders in HUAC. A successful screenwriter and director – his script for the boxing film *Body and Soul* (1947), and his directorial debut *Force of Evil* (1948) had established his reputation as an emerging talent

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<sup>57</sup> Louis Calta, “Two Plays to Quit Broadway Tonight,” *New York Times*, Marcy 18, 1950, 8.

<sup>58</sup> U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Un-American Activities, *Statement of Edward Dmytryk*, 82<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1951; U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Un-American Activities, *Communist Infiltration of Hollywood Motion-Picture Industry— Parts 4 & 5*, 82<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1951; U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Un-American Activities, *Investigation of Communist Activities in the Los Angeles Area – Part 6*, 82<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1951. See also Walter Bernstein, *Inside Out: A Memoir of the Blacklist* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1996), 208; Lee Grant, *I Said Yes to Everything: A Memoir* (New York: Blue Rider Press, 2014), 83.

– Polonsky had joined the Communist Party while teaching English at the City College of New York in the 1930s and had been active among the Hollywood left a decade later. It was his work for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS – the forerunner to the CIA) in World War II, however, that greatly troubled HUAC investigators. During the Allied drive across Europe, Polonsky and his colleagues had conducted “black radio” propaganda campaigns to boost morale and confuse the Germans. Concerned that Polonsky might use these skills to organize a program of domestic cultural subversion, the committee subpoenaed the writer in April 1951. Recently returned from France, where he had moved his family to complete his novel *The World Above*, Polonsky appeared before the committee in Los Angeles, but he refused to answer most of their questions on Fifth Amendment grounds. In a bit of rhetorical flourish, committee chair Harold Velde declared Polonsky to be “a very dangerous citizen” for his refusal, a remark that was duly broadcast throughout the film industry by the *Hollywood Reporter*.<sup>59</sup> And like many unfriendly witnesses, Polonsky was cut loose from his contract with Twentieth Century-Fox – despite a friendly personal relationship with studio chief Darryl Zanuck.<sup>60</sup>

Aside from their pariah status in the industry, Bernstein, Manoff, and Polonsky had one other commonality that helps to illuminate their later allegorical work on *You Are There*. In early 1946, the screenwriter Albert Maltz – who would later be jailed as a member of the Hollywood Ten – stirred up controversy with an opinion piece in the Marxist journal *New Masses*, which critiqued the idea that works of art and literature should be judged primarily by their political utility rather than on their artistic value.

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<sup>59</sup> “Dmytryk Bares Giant Red Plot to Control Screen and Unions,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, April 26, 1951, 10.

<sup>60</sup> For more on Polonsky’s life and career, see Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner, *A Very Dangerous Citizen: Abraham Lincoln Polonsky and the Hollywood Left* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001).

Among left-wing critics, Maltz argued however, the slogan “art as weapon” had hardened into dogma to such an extent that any work that didn’t conform to narrow ideological expectations was dismissed as “worthless or escapist or vicious.” The result had been an impoverishment of left-wing artistic activity.<sup>61</sup>

While Maltz’s critique was typical of anti-Stalinist intellectuals at the time, his revolt against party discipline provoked a fierce backlash, both in the pages of the *New Masses* and in branch meetings from New York to Hollywood. Indeed, at a special meeting of the Hollywood branch convened to address the issue, a majority sided with party leadership in condemning Maltz’s heresy. Only four – Polonsky, Manoff, party organizer John Weber, and Maltz himself – spoke out in favor of artistic freedom. In New York, meanwhile, Bernstein likewise dissented against the forced rigidity of party discipline and sided with Maltz.<sup>62</sup> In the end, however, the pressure on Maltz became too much to bear, and the screenwriter publicly recanted and modified his remarks. The experience, as Christiansen notes, left the three writers “alienated from what had been their political home,” and, together with their later experiences with HUAC underlay a commitment to artistic freedom allegorized in several episodes of *You Are There*.<sup>63</sup>

Thrown together in the pit of the blacklist, Bernstein, Polonsky, and Manoff developed a close and special relationship. As Russell recalled, “under the worst of circumstances,” the three men had found a way not only to survive, but “enjoyed a

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<sup>61</sup> Albert Maltz, “What Shall We Ask of Writers?” *New Masses*, February 12, 1946, 19-22.

<sup>62</sup> Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner, *A Very Dangerous Citizen: Abraham Lincoln Polonsky and the Hollywood Left* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 92-44; Walter Bernstein, *Inside Out: A Memoir of the Blacklist* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1996), 138-139.

<sup>63</sup> Erik Christiansen, *Channeling the Past: Politicizing History in Postwar America* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press), 117.

satisfying working relationship ... it was silly, deadly serious, absurd but fun.”<sup>64</sup> The Factory was “a kind of commune” as Bernstein would later put it – an understanding by which they would share work when work was needed and would generally look out for one another, financially and emotionally. If one member needed help with a script, the others would pitch in; if somebody needed a few extra dollars for a rent payment, or a doctor’s bill, the others would help. Though they had started the group as a matter of economic self-interest, eventually, Bernstein wrote, they found themselves to be operating on the principle of “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.”<sup>65</sup> Russell was eager to help out. Aware of Manoff and Polonsky’s reputation as writers, and opposed to the blacklist himself, he took on all three men as writers for *Danger*. On meeting Polonsky and Manoff for the first time, Russell assured the writers that he was not interested in their personal beliefs; he only wanted to know if they wanted to overthrow the government. To this, Polonsky replied, “No, we just want to overthrow CBS.”<sup>66</sup>

Rounding out the *Danger* creative team – though he would never meet the writers in person during the series’ run – was the director Sidney Lumet, who had replaced *Danger*’s original director Yul Brenner when Brenner left the show to join the cast of *The King and I* on Broadway. According to Bernstein, Lumet and Russell had made a successful team of opposites – Lumet was energetic and effusive, Russell quiet and demure.<sup>67</sup> And while Russell was considered a political innocent, Lumet had attracted the

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<sup>64</sup> Charles Russell, “In the Worst of Times, It Was the Best of Times” (Unpublished manuscript, n.d.), Special Collections & Archives, Oviatt Library, California State University Northridge, 74.

<sup>65</sup> Walter Bernstein, *Inside Out: A Memoir of the Blacklist* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1996), 215.

<sup>66</sup> Charles Russell, “In the Worst of Times, It Was the Best of Times” (Unpublished manuscript, n.d.), Special Collections & Archives, Oviatt Library, California State University Northridge, 25A-25AA; Walter Bernstein, *Inside Out: A Memoir of the Blacklist* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1996), 210.

<sup>67</sup> Walter Bernstein, *Inside Out: A Memoir of the Blacklist* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1996), 22.

attention of Anti-Communists, though he was never blacklisted. While he was working on *Danger*, his name had been published by *Counterattack* for his association with the Drama Lab (“a school well packed with Communists and Front supporters”), and because he had once attended a Communist Party meeting as a young man.<sup>68</sup> *Danger* sponsor Mel Block of Block Drugs had been determined to fight the allegations, however, and had tracked down the accusation to its source, a self-proclaimed former Communist Party member who was now something of a professional government informer. When confronted by Block and Lumet in person at a meeting in Block’s apartment, the informer instantly recanted, admitting that he had mistaken Lumet for someone else.<sup>69</sup>

Following Russell and Lumet’s success with *Danger*, the network decided to assign the producer-director team a second weekly series, *You Are There*. After their initial equivocation on the project, Bernstein, Polonsky, and Manoff enthusiastically embraced the idea that, despite being blacklisted, they would become the principal writers of the new show. “Here was the chance not only to work but to have some fun,” remembered Bernstein. “There was no need to make up stories with unhappy endings, as we had for *Danger*; history would provide more than enough. There might even be a few uplifting ones. We had millennia to choose from.”<sup>70</sup>

Though Dozier had some suggestions of his own – he insisted that the series open with the Landing of the Hindenberg, much to the chagrin of the creatives – Russell was

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<sup>68</sup> American Business Associates, *Counterattack: Facts to Combat Communism* 6, no. 39 (September 26, 1952); Joanna E. Rapf, *Sidney Lumet: Interviews* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi), 185.

<sup>69</sup> Sidney Lumet, “It Must Have Been \_\_\_\_\_,” *The Nation*, April 18, 1981, 469-470; Walter Bernstein, *Inside Out: A Memoir of the Blacklist* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1996), 153-154.

<sup>70</sup> Walter Bernstein, *Inside Out: A Memoir of the Blacklist* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 218.

able to schedule a few subjects favored by his writers, like the Salem Witch Trial, the Execution of Joan of Arc, and the Assassination of Julius Caesar.<sup>71</sup>

With three two series in production in the winter of 1952-53, the Factory was soon working at full steam, busily researching and writing episodes for the first season of *You Are There*, while simultaneously finishing off scripts for *Danger*. As Russell remembered, in the weeks before its premier, Manoff was writing a *You Are There* script on the discovery of anesthesia, researching an episode on the First Salem Witch Trial, and writing a *Danger* script called “The Second Cup.” Bernstein, meanwhile, was writing the scripts “The Death of Jesse James” and “The Capture of John Dillinger” for *You Are There*, and “Death Signs an Autograph” for *Danger*. For his part, Polonsky was writing the *You Are There* premier “The Landing of the Hindenberg,” researching an upcoming episode on Joan of Arc, and finishing the script for the *Danger* episode, “Carpool.” As the writer for the premier episode of *You Are There*, it also fell to Polonsky to come up with Walter Cronkite’s signoff for the show, the line with which the anchor would close each episode. Remembering the tagline used by a local TV weather reporter, Russell suggested to Polonsky they “use something like, ‘What sort of day was it?’” Expanding on the line, Polonsky added, “‘A day like all days filled with those events that alter and illuminate our times. And you were there.’”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Charles Russell, “In the Worst of Times, It Was the Best of Times” (Unpublished manuscript, n.d.), Special Collections & Archives, Oviatt Library, California State University Northridge, 2. It is worth noting, however, that these ideas did not necessarily originate with Russell or the Factory. Several episodes in the first season, including the Salem Witch Trial, the Assassination of Julius Caesar, and the Death of Socrates were produced for Radio by Shayon and his staff, and had also been included in Michel Werner’s original proposal for the television series in 1950; Werner Michel to Sig Mickelson, May 8, 1950, box 1, folder 20, Sig Mickelson Papers, Manuscript Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society.

<sup>72</sup> Charles Russell, “In the Worst of Times, It Was the Best of Times” (Unpublished manuscript, n.d.), Special Collections & Archives, Oviatt Library, California State University Northridge, 59.



*You Are There as Historical Allegory*

The landing of the dirigible Hindenburg, live on a CBS soundstage on February 1, 1953, was an unmitigated disaster. “It was that deadly fucking hydrogen,” Russell explained facetiously in his memoir. In actuality, the show’s problems were more stylistic than chemical, and demonstrated the challenges of adapting the high-concept radio series to the new, visual medium. Little in the series opener seemed to jell: Archival newsreel footage of the 1937 crash in Lakehurst, New Jersey, which had been used as a practical and budget-friendly expedient for depicting the explosion, was of poor quality and sharply contrasted with the live-action reenactments; the CBS newsmen, who appeared on-camera in the inaugural episode, seemed rather stiff and out-of-place; and finally – and most comically – the smoke effect used by stagehands to simulate the crash, worked a bit too well, permeating the studio and enveloping Walter Cronkite as he delivered his closing lines. Such were the perils of live television. In his review of the episode, *New York Times* critic Jack Gould wryly noted, the *You Are There* premier “may prove a good example of one advantage radio has and video does not. That advantage is the imagination of the audience.”<sup>73</sup>

The second episode, “The Capture of Jesse James,” didn’t fare much better. Opined critic John Crosby, Russell and Lumet, “are very talented and imaginative and experienced operatives. They can do better than this.”<sup>74</sup> Stung by such appraisals, Russell and executive producer Bill Dozier huddled up to work out the kinks. Both men felt that

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<sup>73</sup> Russell, 62-63; Don E. Carleton, *Conversations with Cronkite* (Austin, TX: Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, 2010), 124; Jack Gould, “Television in Review: ‘You Are There’ Re-Creates Hindenberg Disaster,” *New York Times*, February 8, 1953, 13.

<sup>74</sup> John Crosby, “Here’s a Show Taking that Long Step Backward,” *Washington Post*, February 10, 1953, 29.

the biggest problem still lay in the visual relationship between latter-day CBS newsmen and their historical interviewees. Seeing commentators like Harry Marble or Charles Collingwood on camera, Russell felt, gave the show “the feeling of an educational lecture”; not to mention that putting well-regarded network correspondents in togas or western getup would be patently ridiculous. At Dozier’s suggestion, Russell and Lumet experimented with an over-the-shoulder shot for interviews while rehearsing the series’ third episode, “The Boston Tea Party.” A coincidence of blocking (the location and movement of actors on a stage), however, revealed a better solution: When the commentator was positioned next to the camera and slightly out of frame, the interviewee appeared to be speaking directly into the camera, making it, and therefore the audience, the interviewer. Without the jarring physical intrusion of the commentators, scenes flowed more naturally, “emotionally involving the audience in the drama of the moment.”<sup>75</sup> The technique worked, and for the rest of the series, the CBS newsmen were heard but not seen.

The prospect of interacting with an unblinking camera lens on live television, however, proved unnerving for some of the actors. Having come from the stage, they were accustomed to having scene partners and a live audience to play off of. A few blew their lines on air. To help alleviate the problem, Russell adjusted the budget to outfit each of the studio cameras with a new device called a teleprompter, which provided a visual aid should actors lose their place in the script. For the most part, just knowing that the prompter was there was enough to overcome the psychological block. As Cronkite

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<sup>75</sup> Russell, 64-65.

remembered, “once they knew it was there, and they knew they had that prop, they didn’t need it.”<sup>76</sup>

With such experimentations in photography and storytelling techniques, the fictional newscast staged each week on *You Are There* became something of a laboratory for TV news production, which was then, in 1953, still a fledgling enterprise.<sup>77</sup> As Christiansen has shown, several innovations pioneered on the program were borrowed by CBS to enhance its “real” news broadcasts. The idea of using an over-the-shoulder shot for interviews, for example, was later used to great effect by network Public Affairs chief Irving Gitlin on the Sunday morning political program *Face the Nation*. The use of remote locations, meanwhile, which was a central feature of *You Are There*’s “coverage” of historical events, was credited with helping the program beat rival NBC’s *Meet the Press* in the ratings. With this cross-pollination of news and entertainment, Christiansen writes, “it is clear that CBS News executives understood their diverse programs as not necessarily confined to any one category; rather, they believed the new medium demanded a more flexible approach to news reporting,” one that emphasized narrative coherence, and which contextualized current events as the outcomes of longer historical processes.<sup>78</sup>

*You Are There*’s experiments in broadcast journalism added an innovative spin on what, from a dramaturgical perspective, followed in much the same format as *Danger* and similar dramatic anthology series then popular on American television. A staple of

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<sup>76</sup> Russell, 71; Carleton, 128.

<sup>77</sup> See Mike Conway, “A Guest in Our Livingroom: The Television Newscaster Before the Rise of the Dominant Anchor,” *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 51, no. 3 (2007): 457-478; Edward Bliss, Jr., *Now the News: The Story of Broadcast Journalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 208-229; Sig Mickelson, *The Decade that Shaped Television News: CBS in the 1950s* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), 81-82.

<sup>78</sup> Christiansen, 113-115.

network schedules during the so-called Golden Age of television, each installment of shows like CBS' *Lux Video Theater* (1950-1959), *Studio One* (1948-1958), or NBC's *Kraft Television Theatre* (1947-1958) presented a different, self-contained story – often a one-act play or adaptation of a stage production or short story. A large part of the attraction of these programs, was that they were performed live on-air, and typically featured talent drawn from stage and screen. Thus, on television screens across the country, viewers could see a performance of *Hamlet* starring Maurice Evans, Lilian Gish in Horton Foote's play *The Trip to Bountiful*, Burgess Meredith cast as the Stage Manager in a production of *Our Town* on *Robert Montgomery Presents*, or an original television play by up-and-coming writers like Rod Serling or Paddy Chayefsky.<sup>79</sup>

Characteristic of all of these pieces was the immediacy and the intimacy of their performance, which was like that of a stage play beamed right into American living rooms from television studios in New York. Given that many of the actors and creative personnel working in the new medium were “unemployed refugees from the theatre,” as Lumet once called them, this is perhaps unsurprising.<sup>80</sup> At their best – and there were many good ones produced – Golden Age dramatic anthologies might have seemed to be the realization of television's artistic potential as a medium of mass entertainment. They could draw the audience in emotionally with compelling characters, engaging stories, and quality performances. As the television playwright Tad Mosel reflected in the late 1950s,

*Never before has there been a medium so suited to what I call the 'personal drama' – that is, a play wherein the writer explores one simple happening, a day,*

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<sup>79</sup> See Frank Sturcken, *Live Television: The Golden Age of 1946-1958 in New York* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1990).

<sup>80</sup> Sidney Lumet, “Notes on TV,” *Cue Magazine*, July 12, 1952, 7.

*or even an hour, and tries to suggest a complete life ... the life may be an unimportant one, but it implies a community, which in turn implies the world.*<sup>81</sup>

*Danger*, the half-hour CBS melodrama series which Russell and Sidney Lumet produced and directed prior (and simultaneous to) *You Are There*, followed many of the same conventions. As an anthology, each installment of *Danger* presented a different story about a character, or characters, involved in personal crises or perilous situations.<sup>82</sup> But while the action typically focused on immediate exigencies of life and death confronting the protagonists, some the best episodes of the series also commented on the human condition. Here was the metonymic part-whole relationship indicated by Mosel. As Lumet explained in a guest column for the arts magazine *Cue* in 1952, on *Danger* “we try to inject the most human relationship and feeling into our material whatever its level.” As an example, Lumet recalled an episode in which a former boxer, a ham-and-egger, was desperately trying to train his younger brother to be the champion he never was. In a dramatic scene, the protégé revolts against his brother’s vicarious projections – he is perfectly happy to be average. By centering on such relatable conflicts, Lumet wrote, *Danger* “has succeeded in being human, honest, and occasionally illustrative of some major point about living.”<sup>83</sup>

As in *Danger*, the drama of *You Are There* typically centered on decisive moments, though ones that involved historical personages from the Western tradition rather than boxers, small time criminals, and troubled youths. Still, though the historical

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<sup>81</sup> Quoted in Frank Sturcken, *Live Television: The Golden Age of 1946-1958 in New York* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1990). The original appears in Tad Mosel, *Other People’s Houses: Six Television Plays* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1956), xi.

<sup>82</sup> Several episodes of *Danger* are available for viewing at the Paley Center for

<sup>83</sup> Sidney Lumet, “Notes on TV,” *Cue Magazine*, July 12, 1952, 7.

events depicted by *You Are There* were far from the “simple happenings” described by Mosel, each episode rendered its drama in emotional, human terms. As indicated by their titles, episodes like “The Execution of Joan of Arc,” “The Crisis of Galileo,” “Mallory’s Tragedy at Everest,” and “The Decision of Robert E. Lee” depicted these famous events as individual struggles, in which characters grapple with an oppressive society, with the vicissitudes of nature, or with matters of conscience. By combining the conventions of TV drama and news, meanwhile, *You Are There* could engage its audience on multiple levels: The drama of a well-crafted stage play, the detail and careful construction of period *mis-en-scene*, the intimate camera shots, and the direct questioning of historical actors by CBS news correspondents all involving the home viewer in the emotion of historical events as if they “were there.”

Polonsky and Lumet’s work on the fourth installment of the series, “The Execution of Joan of Arc,” illustrates how these conventions could work together to create a multi-layered interpretation of a highly mythologized event.<sup>84</sup> The episode opens with the familiar shot of Cronkite seated at his anchor’s desk, where he informs viewers with great earnestness that the entirety of the broadcast will be given over to late-breaking news from France on this day of May 30, 1431. Joan, the nineteen-year old Maid of Orléans, he reports, has defied the church with her miracles and acts of rebellion. Captured at the siege of Compiegne by the Burgundian allies of the English, she has been tried for heresy by an ecclesiastical court and has presently been condemned to death. For more on the story, Cronkite tosses to CBS correspondent Don Hollenbeck, who is

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<sup>84</sup> A recording of the original broadcast of “The Execution of Joan of Arc” is available to view in full at the Paley Center for Media in New York City. A later, filmed version titled “The Final Hours of Joan of Arc” is available online at Archive.org, though its script and cast differs from the original. <https://archive.org/details/thefinalhoursofjoanofarc>

stationed in the main town square of Rouen. The scene then switches to a shot of a market square bustling with soldiers busily erecting the platform upon which Joan is scheduled to be burned at the stake. Describing the scene in a voice-over, Hollenbeck explains that while ordinary criminals are typically killed before being burned, the severity of Joan's heresies have prompted church authorities to decree that Joan will be burned alive. Here, Hollenbeck's narration conveys specific information, moving the story forward.

For more on the story, Hollenbeck tosses to Harry Marble who is positioned inside the fortress of Rouen where Joan has been imprisoned. Picking up the coverage, Marble continues to narrate the situation as it unfolds, and introduces viewers to the *dramatis personae* of Joan's trial as they congregate at the entrance to her cell, including her interrogator, Bishop Pierre Cauchon of Beauvais, and her English captor the Earl of Warwick, with whom Marble is granted a brief interview. With a haughty brusqueness, Warwick announces that Joan – whom he dismisses as little more than a “camp follower” – is a traitor, and as such will be executed no matter whether or not she recants her heresy. “When these windbags and professors get through with her, we'll take her back, and when we get her back, we'll burn her,” he says. “No one bothers about the nobility, they die each day in this war, but this, this nineteen-year-old camp follower is treated as a saint!” The exchange revealed specific information about Joan's fate, but it also demonstrated how *You Are There* interviews were a device for exploring differences in motivation and perspective that can give rise to competing interpretations of events and their meaning: By the end of the episode, Warwick's incredulity at Joan's canonization is

given credence when it is revealed that her saintly image has been wholly constructed by French leaders in need of a martyr around which to rally their people.

After speaking with Warwick, Marble and the CBS cameras were next admitted into the cell, where Joan (Kim Stanley), chained to a stone pillar and exhausted from weeks of interrogation by ecclesiastical authorities, is subjected to one final berating by the Pierre Cauchon, the Bishop of Beauvais. The scene features extensive dialogue between Joan and her inquisitor, and Lumet builds sympathy for Joan through close-ups of her tear-streaked face as she desperately tries to convince Cauchon that the voice in her head is indeed the voice of God. Unmoved, Cauchon stands over Joan and snarls in an equally unsympathetic close-up, “you must throw yourself on the mercy of the court and the church, and you must tell who aided you in this guilt of heresy and renounce all that you have done and all that you have said.” She resisted. “I answer you with the answer truth,” she cried, “and I give you the cry of France that means death to the English, and to all those that oppose the true king of France.”

For contemporary viewers, this image of Joan of Arc as a defiant “unfriendly witness” before a corrupt ecclesiastical authority was a familiar analogy for anti-Communism. Indeed, as Brenda Murphy has pointed out, by the time Polonsky’s teleplay was broadcast in the spring of 1953, a number of popular interpretations of the Joan of Arc story had been produced for stage and screen, including the Broadway re-staging of George Bernard Shaw’s *Saint Joan* (1951), Maxwell Anderson’s play *Joan of Lorraine* (1946) and its 1948 RKO film adaptation *Joan of Arc*, and the NBC *Hallmark Hall of Fame* TV-movie *Joan of Arc* (1952). *CBS is There* had even done a version of the story for radio in 1948. As in Polonsky’s “The Execution of Joan of Arc,” concern with abuses



of power, rigid adherence to doctrine, and repression of individual thought were salient themes in these representations. Polonsky's construction of Joan as a victim – and then a martyr – of the Inquisition however, paralleled his own experiences testifying before HUAC two years earlier. On that occasion, Polonsky, too, had been pressured to name names and betray his comrades, and when he refused on fifth amendment grounds, was vigorously questioned on matters of patriotism and loyalty. As in his “Joan” script, ideological coercion was the predominant theme of the hearing. “I think this committee is trying to make everybody feel or believe the way they sincerely feel or believe,” Polonsky protested, “and is not granting the right to other persons to feel or believe the way they feel or believe.”<sup>85</sup> “You want me to lie and deny my voices,” Joan finally says to Cauchon, “and then will call it the truth.”

As a political allegory, it is worth noting the role that Polonsky assigns the public in Joan's trial and execution. After Joan's interrogation, the *You Are There* coverage switches back to the Rouen market square where Don Hollenbeck asks a group of townsfolk for their opinions on the forthcoming execution. “I'd burn her myself!” sneers one woman. “Well, that's one point of view,” Hollenbeck allows. Turning next to the executioner, he asks why it should be that such a large crowd has turned out to see Joan burned at the stake. “I'd say that any time you burn a young woman, hang a powerful, rich man, a crowd comes out. They like to see the might fall and they enjoy seeing women suffer ... I have nothing but contempt for the dirty crowd that comes to watch and enjoy.” The pair of interactions thus establishes “the crowd” as an important part of the

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<sup>85</sup> Brenda Murphy, *Congressional Theatre: Dramatizing McCarthyism on Stage, Film, and Television* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 162-184; U.S. Congress, House Committee Hearings, 82<sup>nd</sup> Congress, First Session (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1951), 407.

unfolding story and invites a connection between public hysteria and the ideological corruption of political institutions.

Three weeks after the broadcast of “The Execution of Joan of Arc,” themes of public hysteria, superstition, and religious doctrine were again taken up by *You Are There* in Manoff’s teleplay “The First Salem Witch Trial.”<sup>86</sup> A reenactment of the 1692 trial of Bridget Bishop (Janet Ward), the first of nineteen Massachusetts colonists to be executed for witchcraft within a four month period, Manoff’s teleplay, like Polonsky’s “Joan,” had employed what was already a familiar analogy for anti-Communist hysteria. Indeed, opening on Broadway just two months prior to the *You Are There* broadcast, Arthur Miller’s play *The Crucible* had been widely-recognized for its analogies to McCarthyite persecutions of alleged Communists.<sup>87</sup> A partial fictionalization of the events of 1692/93, Miller’s play had told the story of a community seized by a fear of unknown, malignant forces, and its attempts, through a series of ritualistic public trials, to exorcise them. For Miller, the parallels with the HUAC hearings had been obvious: in twentieth-century Washington, as in seventeenth-century Salem, accusations had followed from dubious confessions from fellow-travelers, and guilt established through the use of evidence that was often hard to disprove. Of particular importance in Salem had been the use of so-called “spectral evidence,” charging that the accused had sent their spirit in the form of visions or dreams to torment or bewitch their victims. This, as theater historian Brenda

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<sup>86</sup> “The First Salem Witch Trial,” The Paley Center for Media, New York City.

<sup>87</sup> For contemporary reviews and public awareness of Miller’s analogy, see Brenda Murphy, *Congressional Theatre: Dramatizing McCarthyism on Stage, Film, and Television* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 154-55.

Murphy has noted, “was the equivalent of the twentieth-century accusation that a witness had seen someone at a meeting or that he ‘talked like a Communist.’”<sup>88</sup>

With Manoff himself having himself been identified as a member of the Communist party by associates testifying before HUAC in 1951, it is perhaps no surprise that spectral evidence would be a key concern of his “The First Salem Witch Trial.”<sup>89</sup> At the beginning of episode, Harry Marble speaks with the reverends Cotton Mather (Milton Selzer) and Samuel Willard (Joseph Anthony) during a break in the proceedings. Questioned about what standard of evidence will be used in the trial, Mather patiently explains to Marble why “spectral evidence” must be used by the court. Willard, who viewers have been told is critical of this standard of evidence, frowns in disagreement. He explains to Marble that he “cannot accept proof against which there is no disproof. A person can have no fair defense against another’s hallucinations, dreams, or fancies, if these be all the evidence required for the court.” For all the court or the public knows, he explains further, such confessions could have been extracted under duress. Empirical fact, and not irrational fear, should be the standard. When pressed to account for the accusations against Bishop, Willard explains “we were driven here by persecutions. We have suffered incredible hardship and privation to settle the land. Our lives are somber and lonely ... our fears and imaginations are the constant prey of strange fancies and excitements.” Wondering whether the afflicted girls who had accused Bishop of witchcraft were not suffering from the hardships and uncertainty of settlement life, he acknowledges that, at times, “it indeed seems like the Evil One has descended upon us

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<sup>88</sup> Brenda Murphy, *Congressional Theatre: Dramatizing McCarthyism on Stage, Film, and Television* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 134.

<sup>89</sup> See U.S. Congress, Annual Report of the Committee on Un-American Activities for the Year 1952, 82<sup>nd</sup> Congress, Second Session (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1952), 49.

with unexampled fury. But I must ask this question: Are we destroying him at this trial, or are we destroying each other?"

After concluding the interview, the CBS camera follows Willard into the courtroom where the judges, officials, and members of the general public all begin to take their places. On one side of the courtroom stands the accused, Bridget Bishop chained to a wooden post. On the other, her four young accusers – Abigail Williams, Mercy Lewis, Ann Putnam and Mary Walcott. Not long after the proceedings recommence, spectral evidence of Bishop's witchcraft is introduced in dramatic fashion as the four girls begin convulsing in apparent agony, crying out "she's biting! She's biting!" A close-up of Bishop's face captures a mix of bewilderment and horror at the girls' performance. After the spell passes, the girls begin to testify about the various ways Bishop had inflicted injury on them from afar or had appeared to them in visions. Next, Dr. Griggs, an expert in witchcraft, is brought in to testify as to the procedures by which Bishop had bewitched the girls. When the king's lawyer urges Bishop to confess, she responds incredulously, insisting "I cannot confess to what I do not believe." Several more witnesses are called forth to present further spectral evidence of acts of healing and evil sorcery, at which point the girls again fly into a panic, claiming that a spirit in the form of a yellow bird is attacking them from the rafters. When asked to answer for the attack, Bishop coolly responds, "There was no bird, the children are demented."

As several more witnesses come forth to testify, coverage switches to the Salem jail where Don Hollenbeck interviews several of the accused awaiting trial. Constable John Willard, who was imprisoned when he refused to arrest people accused of witchcraft, is the first to speak to CBS. Asked why he refused to arrest on the orders of

the authorities, Willard explained, “I began to see that the girls were daft. These people are my friends and neighbors. If they want to hang witches, let them start with themselves! They’re the ones that are stirring up all of this horror on us!” Next, in a demonstration of the innocence of the victims accused of witchcraft and called before the tribunal, Hollenbeck interviews Dorcas Goode, who has been accused of roaming the countryside in the form of a wild dog. Appearing in chains before the camera, which tilts down to frame her, she says “My name is Dorcas Goode, I’m five years old, and I love our good Lord.” Here, in the image of an imprisoned child, is the depiction of the Salem witch trials as a public tragedy that has ensnared the innocent in the grips of a feverish paranoia that threatens to lay waste to the fabric of community.

Back in the courtroom, however, the trial of Bridget Bishop continues with the testimony of Deliverance Hobbs, a confessed witch, who reports that she had indeed attended “witch’s meetings” with the accused. At such damning testimony, the king’s lawyer again urges Bishop to confess. Revealing a presumption of guilt operating within the case, the lead judge on the tribunal then demands, “if you are not a witch, what are you?” Provoking a great deal of commotion from the audience, Bishop says, “I am nought what the good Lord made me, a woman.” The individual perseverance of Bridget Bishop, the false accusations, dubious evidence, finger-pointing, and presumption of guilt were all intended to parallel HUAC hearings. Though *You Are There* left it to the viewers to draw these analogies on their own, Walter Cronkite’s parting words give some indication of the episode’s intentions. “Before the year was out, many more had been hanged and hundreds more had been denounced,” he reported. “But as the madness took hold, so did a deep shame and angry resistance of all people, high and low, forcing the

authorities to order a halt and to free those remaining accused.” The wounds, he continued however, were deep, and as a new nation rose from the wilderness, the lessons learned had not been quickly forgotten.

Conflicts between individual civil rights and repressive authority as allegory for anti-Communist crusading was again explored a few weeks later in Manoff’s teleplay “The Death of Socrates.”<sup>90</sup> Broadcasting from fourth century BCE Athens, where Socrates had been judged guilty of corrupting the youth and refusing to accept the gods of the state, the episode opens on a tableau of toga-clad figures gathered around the door of Socrates’ prison cell. They are motionless, somber. Reporting for CBS, Harry Marble informs viewers that these men, like most of Athens, are at the moment in disbelief that Anytus, Athenian politician and prosecutor of Socrates would allow the philosopher to die, despite majority will. “There is still a desperate hope here,” Marble reports, “that somehow ... the proud philosopher will emerge alive and tomorrow they will see him as usual in the marketplace or the theater, the lyceum, or on the steps of the acropolis, debating the nature of truth, honor, courage, and justice.”

Since the nineteenth century, as the classicist Emily Wilson has shown, the story of the trial and death of Socrates, has typically been used as parable for the enlightened individual’s struggle against ignorance and intolerance.<sup>91</sup> Manoff constructs just such an opposition when he has Marble interview the playwright Aristophanes (played by *You Are There* regular E.G. Marshall) in the first scene. Incredulous that Socrates would be put to death for little more than expressing his beliefs and opinions, Aristophanes sneers at “Anytus and his ignorant mob,” who believe that they can silence their critics by

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<sup>90</sup> “The Death of Socrates,” The Paley Center for Media, New York City.

<sup>91</sup> Emily Wilson, *The Death of Socrates* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 195.

silencing Socrates. “Only stupid men,” Aristophanes declares “would get Athens into such a monstrous predicament as condemning to death one of the most prominent thinkers, and being stupid men, they don’t now know how to get out of it.” When Marble points out that Melitus, Socrates’ chief accuser in the trial, had said that Aristophanes’ play *The Clouds* had inflamed his opinion of the philosopher, Aristophanes responds, “Melitus is covering up his own guilt. He’s preparing for the day when he himself is brought before the judges.” Much like latter-day informers like Whittaker Chambers and Elia Kazan, Melitus had turned friendly witness before authorities.

Just as Aristophanes finishes his thoughts, Crito emerges from the cell to give a report on Socrates’ condition, but before he can, Melitus (Milton Selzer) himself strides into the scene to address the group of Socrates’ followers. As he attempts to explain himself to the crowd, assuring them that he never thought that Socrates would refuse to accept the verdict and bring the death penalty upon himself, each man turns his head away in disdain. After he leaves, Crito says “Socrates always said that Melitus was of little consequence in the whole matter. An earnest but unhappy, misled young man.” As Christiansen has noted, this was likely a direct reference to Chambers.<sup>92</sup>

Inside the cell, Socrates (Barry Jones) is surrounded by his followers, all doing what they can to convince Socrates to recant. In the following scenes, Manoff and Lumet stage a series of dialectic debates between Socrates and his followers. When Phaedo asks why Socrates might not escape – a possibility that was available for Manoff, Bernstein and Polonsky, as other blacklisted writers and directors had fled to Europe after being

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<sup>92</sup> Christiansen, 126.

named by HUAC<sup>93</sup> – Socrates reminds his young protégé that he had once said that if the philosopher had not been allowed the right to freely discourse in Athens, it would “be irrational to expect that in a foreign city” he would be more welcome. For the intellectual, escaping into exile would be a true death of both body and beliefs. After gently engaging several of his followers in dialectic debate and revealing his true intentions, Socrates drinks the cup of hemlock and dies. Cronkite’s closing suggests contemporary parallels. Athens, he reports could not help but grieve for the barefoot gadfly. “The cup of poison in their minds became a test and symbol of high principles and purity. And all those who would live by such goals were bound by centuries after to taste again in some way this bitter brew.” “And to think this program was televised in May of 1953,” wrote Russell years later, “it’s unbelievable.”<sup>94</sup>

But it wasn’t every episode of *You Are There* that allegorized anti-Communism. Indeed, not all of the series episodes were written by Bernstein, Polonsky, and Manoff. In order to reduce the possibility that his writers would be discovered, Russell had hired a few non-blacklisted writers to pad out the first season of the show, including Arnold Schulman (“The Assassination of Julius Caesar,” “The Boston Tea Party”) and Irve Tunick (“The Rise of Adolf Hitler”). Though these men might not have been as deeply affected by the blacklist as Polonsky, Manoff, and Bernstein, their episodes still suggested contemporary parallels. Schulman’s “The Assassination of Julius Caesar,” for instance, tells the story of political overreach, suspension of constitutional powers and rights, the demagoguery of a skillful politician in a bid to seize state power, and the crisis

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<sup>93</sup> See Rebecca Prime, *Hollywood Exiles in Europe: The Blacklist and Cold War Film Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014).

<sup>94</sup> Russell, 78.



of conscience of a young Brutus (Paul Newman) caught between competing loyalties. Political demagoguery is again a theme in Schulman's teleplay "The Boston Tea Party," in which the embattled ship owner Francis Rotch (Gene Lyons) accuses Sam Adams (E.G. Marshall) and his Sons of Liberty of whipping up the anger of "the rabble" against the tea tax to further their own political ambitions. In a monologue that could almost read as a critique of the junior senator from Wisconsin, Rotch, at a meeting of the colonial assembly implores the gathered crowd, "this country is having a wave of prosperity ... Are we going to risk throwing it away because Sam Adams wants to get control of the Whig Party? Don't you see what he's trying to do!? He's trying to stir up your emotions!" And although the Sons of Liberty end up throwing Roche's tea in the harbor, cool tempers prevail. As Cronkite notes in his closing, "the deed was not that of a lawless mob, but the deliberate and well-considered act of intelligent as well as determined men."<sup>95</sup>

But neither did all of the *You Are There* episodes scripted by Polonsky, Manoff, and Bernstein deal exclusively with anti-anti-Communist allegory. Several had more liberal political themes. Polonsky's teleplay "The Conquest of Mexico," for example, presented dueling perspectives on Western colonialism and missionary work through the story of Hernán Cortes' overthrow of the Aztec Empire and establishment of the colony of New Spain in the early sixteenth century.<sup>96</sup> At the beginning of the episode, Harry Marble interviews Cortes (John Baragrey), who explains his mission to the home audience, that he has been ordered to conquer the land for his emperor, Charles V and to

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<sup>95</sup> Both "The Assassination of Julius Casesar" and "The Boston Tea Party" are available at The Paley Center for Media, New York City.

<sup>96</sup> "The Conquest of Mexico," directed by Sidney Lumet (1953; Chatsworth, CA: Woodhaven Entertainment, 2004), DVD.

“convert these barbarians to our holy faith.” As a symbol, Cortes explains that he has ordered one of his captains to “raise the cross right in the main temple of the Aztecs, and to cast down their murderous idols.” When Marble asks if it is perhaps unwise to thus antagonize the Aztecs, Cortes responds in the affirmative, but adds that “I can no longer bear the sight of the victims sacrificed daily outside the very doors of this palace.”

Indeed, the apparent violence of the Aztec’s rituals are noted by Mike Wallace reporting from the site of the main Aztec temple, who notes that its walls “are stained with human blood.”

As expected, the act inflames the Aztecs, who pull down the cross from the top of the temple and mount an attack against Cortes and his vastly outnumbered conquistadors. At the urging of his translator Marina (Eartha Kitt), however, Cortes and a troop of armed soldiers enter Montezuma’s palace to arrest the king and to force him at sword-point to order his soldiers to submit to the Spaniards. Conflict between the paradigms of Western Christianity and the religion of the Aztecs are played out through the dialogue between Cortes and Montezuma. For Cortes, who is incredulous that the Aztecs unwillingness to accept the cross, the Aztec idol is a “Satan that eats human hearts and flesh.” In an impassioned response, Montezuma replies, “my priests placed their gods in the temple that was built and raised for their gods. If you wish to raise a cross, raise it in your own temple, which is in your own land!” Realizing that he is at Cortes’ mercy, Montezuma says “you come to steal both our souls and our lands and treasures. What does that leave us? It leaves us slaves! Without our gods! Without our fortunes!” The episode closes with a shot of Marina, bending to the floor to pick up a feather that has fallen from Montezuma’s headdress. She looks at it thoughtfully before letting it fall again. In the

gesture are foretold both the fall of the Aztec Empire, and the European conquest of all of the lands of the Americas to come.

Meanwhile, economic class is a central theme in Bernstein's teleplay "The Gettysburg Address."<sup>97</sup> Reporting from the newly completed cemetery at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, as a crowd waits for the arrival of president Lincoln and Edward Everett, Harry Marble speaks to the bereaved parents of a young soldier killed at the Battle of Gettysburg. "Do you know why he died?" asked the father, an Irish immigrant from New York City named O'Connell. "To preserve the Union?" Marble offers. "To preserve the rich," O'Connell shoots back. Noting that if he and his wife could afford the 300 dollars for a replacement, his son Tom might still be alive. "It's a rich man's war and a poor man's fight," O'Connell continues. And what's more, the federal government had recently come to sign older, working men like him up for the draft "men who work to support a family. It wasn't enough that they took our sons!" Here was an interpretation of the Civil War that did not deal in simple bromides like "preserve the Union," but one that took into account historical realities for many working-class immigrants in northern cities.

### *After the Factory*

After three years of producing the show in New York – first at the CBS studios in Grand Central, then at a larger facility in the Bronx when the show moved to film – the network decided to move the show to its new Television City studios in Los Angeles for the 1955-56 season. According to Russell, there had been some rumblings of the move

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<sup>97</sup> "The Gettysburg Address," directed by Sidney Lumet (1953; Chatsworth, CA: Woodhaven Entertainment, 2004), DVD.

for some time, and he had been concerned that it would mean the end of his relationship with Polonsky, Manoff, and Bernstein. “My blacklisted writer friends in the ‘factory’ were justifiably bitter about their Hollywood betrayal and I knew they would never consider going back there,” he wrote, adding that the nature of the show and the frequent script changes involved meant that the work couldn’t easily be done through the mail. Russell knew that Lumet, too, had a distaste for Los Angeles, disparaging it “an industry town.”<sup>98</sup>

Russell’s anxiety about the move would prove inconsequential. As he and Dozier were waiting for the elevator one day after reviewing the dailies for the episode “The Triumph of Alexander the Great,” the executive producer broke the news. “*You Are There* is going to be done in Hollywood from now on and I will be producing it,” Dozier said. “Also your services are no longer required by CBS. If you have any questions check with [programming executive] Hubbell Robinson.” When the elevator door opened, Dozier got on alone, leaving Russell behind, stunned.<sup>99</sup>

When he asked around about the decision to move on without him, Russell was told that Dozier had discovered that his producer had been using blacklisted writers on the program. While Dozier had suspected in some time – indeed, after reading Polonsky’s teleplay “The Emergence of Jazz,” Dozier had said to Russell, “tell Abe, I think it’s a good script” – it wasn’t until Hubbell Robinson and some of the executives got nervous that the sponsor, the Prudential Insurance Company would find out that they decided to take action. This may have merely been the point that put the decision over the edge. The move was justified in purely economic terms: The new CBS facilities were far superior to

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<sup>98</sup> Russell, 145.

<sup>99</sup> Russell, 149; Bernstein, 234.

the dilapidated studio in the Bronx, and would be better suited to producing the show, and Prudential could be assured more star power for the show if it moved to Hollywood.<sup>100</sup>

But the shows that were produced in Hollywood during the last two years of the series' run were of lesser quality. They lacked the dramatic engagement that had characterized the earlier seasons during the Factory's tenure. Noticeably absent was the element of ambiguity and myth-quashing that had been the central feature of earlier episodes. Instead, subjects like "The Great Comstock Silver Strike," "Washington Crosses the Delaware," and "Spindletop" were presented as one-dimensional events.

In the end, Russell wrote, "it was the show itself that became suddenly a symbol of all I had lived through and what they had shared with me in the years of its success. It had become a voice of reason in an age of wild alarms."<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Russell, 150-151.

<sup>101</sup> Russell, 152.

### **Chapter Four: *Roots***

*In this country, we are young, brash, and technologically oriented. We are all trying to build machines so that we can push a button and get things done a millisecond faster. But as a consequence, we are drawing away from one of the most priceless things we have – where we came from and how we got to be where we are.*

- Alex Haley<sup>1</sup>

On the day of its premier on the ABC network on January 23, 1977, *Roots* producers David L. Wolper and Stan Margulies were nervous with anticipation. Despite the publicity generated from Alex Haley's bestselling genealogical saga and from favorable write-ups in several national magazines, the commercial success of the series was far from certain. For one thing, its subject matter, the history of slavery told from the perspectives of slaves, was virtually without precedent on American television (the exception was *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, a 1974 TV movie based on an Ernest J. Gaines novel of the same name). Rarely had the human experience of slavery been presented on television in such an emotionally powerful way; rarer still had a dramatic television series featured a predominantly black cast – typically, until this time American television had consigned blacks to situation comedies and variety shows.<sup>2</sup> There had also been concern that, just a few years after the height of the civil rights movement, the series might offend southern affiliates, or worse, that its graphic depiction of violence perpetrated by whites against black slaves would incite racial violence. Such controversy had predictably rattled advertisers, the largest of whom had been hesitant to purchase time. The stakes were high. And as Wolper recalled a few years later, even

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in interview, "Haley's Rx: Talk, Write, Reunite," *Time*, February 14, 1977, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Leslie Fishbein, "Roots: Docudrama and the Interpretation of History," in *American History/American Television: Interpreting the Video Past*, ed. John E. O'Connor (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1983), 279.

while he had been confident his company had produced a winner, “even the Sunday night that we went on the air we were still biting our nails.”<sup>3</sup>

Whatever doubts remained were soon dispelled. For eight straight nights, American television viewers – of all races and ethnicities – sat transfixed by what some had taken to calling “Haley’s Comet.”<sup>4</sup> During the first night of the broadcast, an estimated 28.8 million television homes (a 51 share of the audience) tuned into *Roots*, making it the ninth highest rated show ever at the time. As word spread over the next seven consecutive nights and more viewers tuned in, *Roots* would go on to shatter a number of existing audience records, attracting 130 million viewers – nearly half the population of the U.S. in 1977 – becoming the most-watched television series ever. It was “Super Bowl every night,” as one TV executive marveled.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, across the country, Americans rearranged their social calendars in order to gather around the electronic hearth and participate in the shared cultural experience of watching *Roots*. Bars and restaurants noted a steep decline in business during *Roots* week, and those with television sets had tuned them in to ABC to accommodate their patrons. In Las Vegas, meanwhile, there had been reports of people leaving shows early to catch the series, and hotel kitchens had scrambled to keep up with the spike in room service orders.<sup>6</sup> For the two-hour series finale on January 30, a previously unimaginable 80 million Americans tuned in, the largest audience for a single television program until that time. Not only had *Roots*

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<sup>3</sup> David L. Wolper, “American Marketing Association,” undated, box 13, folder 30, The Stan Margulies Papers, University of Southern California Libraries. So concerned were the big, blue-chip companies about possibly offending white viewers, Wolper noted in his speech, that none of them wanted their ads to air in the first position of the first commercial break. The spot would go to PreparationH.

<sup>4</sup> “Why *Roots* Hit Home,” *Time*, February 14, 1977.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> e.g. Bill E. Burk, “*Roots* Left Mark on Night Life,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, January 31, 1977, 5; David L. Wolper and Quincy Troupe, *The Inside Story of T.V.’s ‘Roots’* (New York: Warner Books, 1978), 146.

presented history on television, its broadcast had made television history. In its wake, *Broadcasting* magazine declared, “television may never be the same again.”<sup>7</sup>

In the weeks and months following ABC’s broadcast of the miniseries, debate over the sources of *Roots*’ enormous success – especially among white audiences – became something of a favorite parlor game in the television industry and around watercoolers across the country. For the cynical, the series’ vivid depiction of slavery and unflattering portrayal of white characters had played to white liberal guilt; others, perhaps more practically, pointed out that the series had aired during a cold snap that kept many on the East Coast homebound with nothing else to do but watch TV. Ever confident about the emotional resonance of his films, however, Wolper maintained in a 1978 publicity book on *Roots* that what had attracted so many viewers – black and white – to the series night after night was that it “was a very strong drama about people. It went beyond just a black story – it dealt with universal truths and human emotions that everybody could respond to.” *Roots*’ popularity, in other words, went beyond its representation of race, having much to do with the intergenerational saga that ABC had branded as the “triumph of an American family” – a description that left out race altogether.<sup>8</sup> As for its depiction of slavery, Wolper continued, the series had appealed to a mass audience that was “yearning for information – but [presented] in an entertaining, dramatic, and emotional form.”<sup>9</sup>

For others, however, what had made *Roots* so compelling was that it had provided, in the context of a major television event, a usable past that confronted the

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<sup>7</sup> “The Effects of ‘Roots’ Will be With TV for a Long Time,” *Broadcasting*, February 7, 1977, 52; “‘Roots’ Biggest Event in TV Entertainment History,” *Broadcasting*, January 31, 1977, 19.

<sup>8</sup> “The Triumph of an American Family” [advertisement], *New York Times*, January 24, 1977, 30.

<sup>9</sup> Wolper and Troupe, *The Inside Story of T.V.’s ‘Roots’*.



horrific and painful history of slavery and racial oppression in the United States. That it did so in the late-1970s had made a poignant coda to the civil rights era. Writing just days after the conclusion of the ABC broadcast, the historian and civil rights activist Roger Wilkins explained in the context of a *New York Times* editorial that “the essence of the racial struggle in America has not been physical, or legal, or even spiritual. It has been existential, about truth and falsehood, reality and illusion.” From that perspective, he continued, “*Roots* may have been the most significant civil rights event since the Selma-to-Montgomery march of 1965.”<sup>10</sup> Speculating on the series’ popularity among white audience members, meanwhile, *Washington Post* journalist William Grieder asked his readers to “try to imagine the reasons why this gruesome story, so long suppressed or excluded from our orthodox history, should now enthrall us. What makes the ugly truth so compelling to America’s popular audience at this point?” Whatever the varied theories and explanations, in the final analysis, he argued, “our shared memory has been abruptly altered, broadened to incorporate long-denied realities.” In revising the image of the black slave from the caricatured figure of the minstrel tradition – the “bumbling Sambo” to borrow Wilkins’ phrasing – to the heroically courageous and determined characters of Haley’s narrative with whom both whites and blacks might identify, *Roots* presented what scholars have called a discourse of “counter-memory”: a narrative that sought to recover the historical experiences of a marginalized community that had been distorted and repressed by the dominant, white culture.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Roger Wilkins, “The Black Ghosts of History,” *New York Times*, February 2, 1977, 19.

<sup>11</sup> For theoretical engagement with the concept of “counter-memory,” see George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 211-231. See also Henry Giroux, “Border Pedagogy in the Age of Postmodernism,” in *The Giroux Reader* ed. Christopher G. Robbins (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2006), 47-66; Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 6-12.

For his part, however, Wolper had a different conception of *Roots*' usable past. As he explained to the poet Quincy Troupe in a 1978 interview, "My motive was simple: to make an entertaining show that informed, that got a big audience and made a lot of money – that was my motive. Period." Whether or not the series made a positive impact on race relations in America was immaterial: "If it changes America, fine; if it doesn't, so be it. It was not intended to be a therapeutic catharsis."<sup>12</sup> That *Roots* resonated so powerfully with audiences, however, and that the story has been so resilient over the past thirty years – even despite revelations of Alex Haley's flawed research methodology, his inaccuracies, and his plagiarism of an earlier work, Harold Courlander's *The African* (1967) – speaks to its enduring power to captivate audiences. Indeed, in his foreword to a recent anthology of academic essays devoted to *Roots* and its legacy, the historian Henry Louis Gates, Jr. wrote that *Roots*' signal contribution to American culture was that, by presenting the story of a black family, it had "challenge[d] audiences to face their history while inspiring African Americans in particular to search for personal connections to a past that had long been silenced by that history and, for the first time, to see themselves as part of a longer journey with roots deeper than slavery on this side of the Atlantic."<sup>13</sup>

### *Finding His Roots*

Alex Haley grew up in the small town of Henning, Tennessee, about fifty miles north of Memphis. As a small boy, he used to spend summer evenings sitting on the porch of his maternal grandmother's house, listening to his older relations drift between

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Wolper and Troupe, *The Inside Story of T.V.'s 'Roots'*, 173-74.

<sup>13</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Foreword," in *Reconsidering Roots: Race, Politics, and Memory*, eds. Erica L. Ball and Kellie Carter Jackson (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2017), xii.

current happenings and ancient family lore. Passed down from generation to generation, the stories Haley heard as a youngster wove an intergenerational tapestry that traced the family lineage all the way back to the mid-eighteenth century, and to a person his elders would call “The African.” Too young at the time to fully understand the grand sweep of the narrative, Haley sat quietly behind his grandmother’s rocking chair as she, his aunts and cousins spoke about plantation life, of old “massas,” of far-off places like Annapolis and Spotsylvania County, Virginia, and of ancestors like The African Kunta Kinte, his daughter Kizzy, and her son “Chicken” George. It wasn’t until after Haley had grown, served out a twenty-year career in the U.S. Coast Guard, and established himself as a freelance writer that his thoughts returned again to the old family narrative and to the few snatches of African words he had learned as a boy on those summer evenings in Henning.<sup>14</sup>

Over a span of twelve years, and between writing assignments for magazines such as *Playboy* and *Readers’ Digest*, Haley dedicated himself to researching his family history, following every lead, place-name, and African word he had heard time and again during his childhood. Eventually, he was able to trace his lineage from Henning to the village of Juffure in the Gambia, where his forbearer, Kinte, was born.

It was upon travelling to Juffure in 1967 that Haley was introduced through a series of contacts to a local *griot* (a poet, storyteller, and an important figure in West African communities) named Kebba Kanga Fofana, whom, it was said could help him. After hiring an ensemble of translators and musicians – for *griots* would evidently not practice their craft without musical accompaniment – Haley and a knot of curious

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<sup>14</sup> Alex Haley, “Black History, Oral History, and Genealogy,” *The Oral History Review* 1 (1973): 1-25; Alex Haley, “My Furthest-Back Person - ‘The African,’” *New York Times Magazine*, July 16, 1972, 13-16.

villagers listened as the elderly Fofana recited the long history of the Kinte clan. For nearly two hours, the *griot* held forth in what Haley would later describe as a “biblical” style, until he recounted a minor detail that Haley recognized from the stories he had heard as a boy: that the eldest son of a Juffure man called Omoro Kinte had disappeared one day while chopping wood, never to be seen again.

Hearing the story of his long-lost ancestor reverberate across space and time was clearly an emotional experience for Haley. “I sat as if I were carved of stone,” he wrote.

*My blood seemed to have congealed. This man whose lifetime had been in this back-country African village had no way in the world to know that he had just echoed what I had heard all through my boyhood years on my grandma’s porch in Henning, Tennessee ... of an African who always insisted his name was ‘Kintay’; who had called a guitar a ‘ko,’ and a river within the state of Virginia, ‘Kamby Bolongo’; and who had been kidnapped into slavery while not far from his village, chopping wood, to make himself a drum.*<sup>15</sup>

But Haley was intimately aware that the moment was not his alone. In publicizing his search for his family roots – before the book, there were articles in publications like *Reader’s Digest* and the *New York Times* as well as numerous public appearances, television interviews, and lectures – his uncertain and emotionally fraught journey might stand in for the millions of African Americans who could not, or perhaps would never be able to trace their ancestors back more than a few generations. “Every black American goes back ancestrally to someone who was taken, as Kunta was, from some village, chained to the hold of some stinking ship, sold onto some plantation to live out his years in slavery,” Haley told an interviewer, “so the story of any one of us is really the saga of us all.”<sup>16</sup> Haley’s research appealed to whites as well. “What seems bizarre to me – in the extreme,” wrote WNET-TV producer Christopher Lukas after attending one of Haley’s

<sup>15</sup> Alex Haley, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 679.

<sup>16</sup> Haley quoted in Murray Fisher, “Playboy Interview: Alex Haley,” *Playboy*, January, 1977, 70.

lectures, “is how those of us with ‘known’ lineage, spend so little time even thinking about our ancestors, much less learning about them.”<sup>17</sup>

As inspiring and as affirmational as Haley’s story was, however, his claim to have definitively traced his lineage to a village in West Africa, in spite of all of the family ruptures and documentary dead ends that typically confronted the decedents of slaves researching their genealogies, was dubious. In a widely publicized investigation appearing in the (London) *Sunday Times* shortly after the January 1977 broadcast of the ABC miniseries adaptation, the British journalist Mark Ottway detailed the findings of his own efforts cross-checking Haley’s research, including a week spend in the Gambia. What Ottway discovered, was that the historical Juffure was hardly the idyllic Eden that Haley had described in *Roots*, and which made it into the subsequent television series. Rather, the village had actually been a British trading post in the 1760s when Haley’s narrative began, whose residents were more likely to have collaborated with whites involved in the slave trade than to have been its victims. More alarmingly, Ottway revealed that Haley’s principle informant, the *griot* Fofana, was “a man of notorious unreliability who knew in advance what Haley wanted to hear and who subsequently gave a totally different version of the tale.” When Ottway pressed Haley on these points, the author conceded that, at least in his Gambian researches, he may have been misled (Nonetheless, the day after the *Sunday Times* piece appeared, Haley, on his way to London to promote the UK broadcast of the *Roots* miniseries, publicly disputed Ottway’s

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<sup>17</sup> Christopher Lukas to Alex Haley, July 16, 1972, box 281, folder 004, The David L. Wolper Collection, University of Southern California Libraries.

criticisms, saying that the journalist had made “substantial misrepresentations of my statements to him in the course of our conversation”).<sup>18</sup>

Other critical appraisals followed. In a 1981 article in the scholarly journal *History in Africa*, Donald R. Wright, an ethnographer with especial interest in the history of the Mandinka state in which Juffure was located, took particular issue with Haley’s research methodology. By telling his grandmother’s story in detail to local officials and interlocutors in the Gambia, Wright explained, and in putting uncritical faith in a single informant, Haley had presented “a virtual scenario of how *not* to conduct fieldwork in oral societies.”<sup>19</sup>

The American portion of Haley’s research likewise proved problematic under closer scrutiny. In an article appearing in the *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* the same year, the researchers Gary and Elizabeth Mills (an historian and genealogist, respectively) charged that Haley had misrepresented and misinterpreted much of the plantation records, wills, and census data upon which he had so firmly established his antebellum genealogy. His crucial fault, they wrote, had been in taking his family’s tradition at face value – a strain of confirmation bias the Millses explained was quite common among amateur genealogists. “Family traditions are surrealistic images of the past, blurred by time, colored by emotion and imagination,” they wrote. “Family traditions are not definite, intrinsically authentic roadmaps to one’s heritage, and it matters not whether one’s family is Afro-American, Irish, Italian, or Japanese.” The fact

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<sup>18</sup> Mark Ottway, “Tangled Roots,” *Sunday Times*, April 10, 1977, 17; “Haley Defends ‘Roots’ Facts,” *Washington Post*, April 11, 1977, A3; Ellen Goodman, “Alex Haley and the Truth of Roots,” *Washington Post*, April 26, 1977. The differences between the Juffure of Haley’s imagination and the historical trading center were also discussed in an earlier book review. See Willie Lee Rose, “An American Family,” *The New York Review of Books*, November 11, 1976, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Donald R. Wright, “Uprooting Kunta Kinte: On the Perils of Relying on Encyclopedic Informants,” *History in Africa* 8 (1981), 210. Emphasis in original.

of the matter was, they continued, was that their own research into Haley's few generalized references (there were no footnotes or citations in the text) yielded materials that directly contradicted his claims. Particularly inconvenient for *Roots*, the Millses noted, was that the slave Toby, whom Haley had identified as Kunta Kinte, had appeared in official documents predating the arrival of the slave ship *Lord Ligonier*, which had putatively borne Kinte through the middle passage.<sup>20</sup>

At the time of publication, Haley had openly acknowledged that his book had, of necessity, relied on creative invention. Dialogue, and his characters' internal thoughts, were the most obvious examples. "Since I wasn't yet around when most of the story occurred," he wrote in the book's closing pages, "by far most of the dialogue and most of the incidents are of necessity a novelized amalgam of what I *know* took place together with what my researching led me to plausibly *feel* took place."<sup>21</sup> The result had been a genre that Haley awkwardly called "faction," a blending of fact and fiction that was, as he explained to an interviewer, a "heightened history, or fiction based on real people's lives."<sup>22</sup>

As a few reviewers pointed out, however, a rash of historical errors contradicted Haley's claims to accuracy and authenticity. Highlighting a number of such "disconcerting" interpretive errors – like having Kunta Kinte work on a cotton (and not tobacco) plantation in Northern Virginia in the eighteenth century, the inconvenient realities of the historical Juffure, and whites' evolving attitudes towards the emancipation

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<sup>20</sup> Gary B. Mills and Elizabeth S. Mills, "'Roots' and the New 'Faction': A Legitimate Tool for Clio?," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 89, no. 1 (1981): 3-26.

<sup>21</sup> Alex Haley, *Roots*, 686. Emphasis in original.

<sup>22</sup> Haley quoted in John F. Baker, "PW Interviews: Alex Haley," *Publishers Weekly*, September 6, 1976, 12.

of slaves – the Johns Hopkins University historian of Reconstruction Willie Lee Rose opined that such details might have been excusable if only they weren't so numerous. As it was, they tended to “chip away at the verisimilitude of central matters in which it is important to have full faith.”<sup>23</sup> A few readers, meanwhile, lodged their complaints directly with Haley himself. Emmett B. Carmichael, a professor emeritus of biochemistry and genealogical researcher at the University of Alabama wrote such a letter to the author, asking incredulously, “How could you write a book about your family when there were no records kept about who the father or mother was of these children born in slavery ... how could you compile such a story?”<sup>24</sup>

Other readers, however, including a few prominent academics, were far more forgiving of the books' factual flaws. “It's a work of fiction,” the Harvard historian Bernard Bailyn responded when asked by a reviewer about Ottway's charges against *Roots*. “Its importance is as a work of fiction and a very powerful one. I don't think its importance rests on whether or not such and such a ship was in such and such a place.” The value of Haley's book, according to this view, was in its impact as a usable past, rather than as a contribution to professional historiography. Other scholars agreed. “People may find areas in *Roots* which they can criticize,” conceded the University of Chicago historian John Hope Franklin, “but it seems to me that the importance of *Roots* is

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<sup>23</sup> Willie Lee Rose, “An American Family,” *The New York Review of Books*, November 11, 1976, 3-4.

<sup>24</sup> Emmett B. Carmichael to Alex Haley, August 22, 1977, box 2, folder 28, The Alex Haley Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Haley's response to Carmichael is also preserved in the same folder: “You know, professor, the interesting thing about that question is that it would imply that no one may be certain of his parentage unless specific records exist. I knew – and so did you – who my mother was, and who my father was, before I even knew the word ‘record,’ or what it meant. How I knew, and how you knew, was because our parents told us – Oral History. The slaves were people, who told their children, who in turn told their children until, in my maternal family got it down to me as a boy; then I grew up and became an author.” Still, Haley's point about oral history could be debated (cf. Mills & Mills, above).



as a symbol of the historical development of the spirit of a family and of a race.”

Similarly, David B. Davis agreed that “one could take almost any history and go over it with a fine-tooth comb and come up with errors or points that are debatable.” What Haley had produced, rather, was a usable past that addressed gaps in the public understanding of the historical experience of black slavery. “We all need certain myths about the past,” Davis averred, “and one must remember how much in the myths about the Pilgrims or the immigrants coming here has been revised.”<sup>25</sup> Haley himself concurred. “Blacks long have needed a hypothetical Eden like whites have,” he told *Newsweek*.<sup>26</sup>

Encouraged by the positive response to his lectures among both blacks and whites, and perhaps eager to demonstrate the diversity of the built-in audience for a television adaptation of his forthcoming book, Haley wrote Wolper company producer Stan Margulies in October of 1975, stating that, in his view, there seemed to be “a worldwide fascination with a new portrayal of U.S. blacks, at odds with the historically pervasive kind of grinning caricature.”<sup>27</sup> Soon, Haley, together with Margulies and executive producer David Wolper would utilize television to challenge the stereotypical image of the comic, inferior, and dependent slave – though some critics would disagree about their effectiveness.

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<sup>25</sup> Bailyn and Davis quoted in Israel Shenker, “Some Historians Dismiss Report of Factual Mistakes in ‘Roots’,” *New York Times*, April 10, 1977, 29; Franklin quoted in Malcom R. West, “Black Historians Reflect on Criticisms of ‘Roots,’” *Jet*, April 28, 1977, 16.

<sup>26</sup> Haley quoted in Kenneth L. Woodward and Anthony Collins, “The Limits of ‘Faction’,” *Newsweek*, April 25, 1977, 87.

<sup>27</sup> Alex Haley to Stan Margulies, October 23, 1975, box 105, folder 001, The David L. Wolper Collection, University of Southern California Libraries.

*Television's David Wolper*

It was at a film festival in Moscow in 1969, well before Alex Haley finished work on his manuscript, that David Wolper, then one of the country's most celebrated documentary filmmakers, first learned about the author's magnum opus through a mutual friend, the actor and civil rights activist Ruby Dee.<sup>28</sup> Ever eager to hear about forthcoming literary projects that might make for compelling non-fiction films (he had previously adapted Theodore White's *The Making of the President: 1960*, William L. Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, and John F. Kennedy's last book, *A Nation of Immigrants*), Wolper promptly sought out information about Alex Haley and his search for roots. He was soon disappointed to learn, however, that Columbia Pictures had already bought an option on the book. "That was the end of that," he remembered thinking.<sup>29</sup>

In the meantime, Wolper and his production company pressed on with other projects. In 1972, a Wolper Productions crew – which significantly included a number of black cameramen and sound technicians – under the direction of Mel Stuart was on location at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum to film *Wattstax*, a benefit concert marking the seventh anniversary of the Watts riots. The footage was edited into a documentary released under the same title and was nominated for a Golden Globe for best documentary film.<sup>30</sup> On television, meanwhile, Wolper had partnered with the Du Pont corporation and CBS to produce the Emmy-winning *Appointment with Destiny*

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<sup>28</sup> See Wolper and Quincy Troupe, *The Inside Story of T.V.'s 'Roots'*, 34; David L. Wolper and David Fisher, *Producer: A Memoir* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 225; Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, *With Ossie and Ruby: In This Life Together* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1998), 339-40, 366-67.

<sup>29</sup> Wolper and Troupe, *The Inside Story of T.V.'s 'Roots'*, 34.

<sup>30</sup> "Winners and Nominees," Hollywood Foreign Press Association, accessed January 24, 2019, <https://www.goldenglobes.com/film/wattstax>

series of docudrama films that – much like *You Are There* in the 1950s – focused on dramatic recreations of pivotal historical moments, like *The Last Days of John Dillinger* (1971), *Showdown at O.K. Corral* (1972), and *Surrender at Appomattox* (1972). Soon after, Wolper teamed up with the American Heritage Publishing Company to produce another series of four hour-long television specials that were to be aired on the ABC network in advance of the nation’s bicentennial. These were *The World Turned Upside Down* (1973) on the Battle of Yorktown; *Lincoln: Trial by Fire* (1974), a study of the president’s tempestuous relationship with General George McClellan during the Civil War; *The Yanks are Coming* (1974), a drama of the First World War that focused on the life of a soldier; and *The Honorable Sam Houston* (1975).<sup>31</sup>

According to Wolper, it was exactly two years after he had first learned of Columbia’s interest in Haley’s book that he learned, through a quite coincidental meeting with the author’s assistant, that the studio’s option had lapsed. Immediately, Wolper reached out to Haley’s lawyer Lou Blau to negotiate a deal. Rather than plan for a feature-length film, however, Wolper convinced Haley and his representatives that the scale of the project was better suited to episodic television. Further, as Margulies recalled, “Alex was interested in communicating with the greatest number of people and we said one night on television is the equivalent of ten years of a movie run.”<sup>32</sup>

In the meantime, Wolper had entered into talks with Barry Diller, head of the ABC network’s Movies for Television division (and later chairman and CEO of Fox,

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<sup>31</sup> “Appointment with Destiny (1971-1973),” The Wolper Organization, accessed January 18, 2019, <http://www.wolperorg.com/shows/detailsb31e.html?showID=281>; “The American Heritage Specials (1973-1975),” The Wolper Organization, accessed January 18, 2019, <http://www.wolperorg.com/shows/details5a0a.html?showID=334>.

<sup>32</sup> Margulies quoted in Matthew F. Delmont, *Making Roots: A Nation Captivated* (Oakland, CA: The University of California Press, 2016), 94.

Inc.), and his assistants Lou Rudolph and Brandon Stoddard. While the three men were convinced that *Roots* would make a strong addition to the network's stable of long-form properties, the ABC brass were hesitant to sign off on purchasing an option on a yet-unfinished book whose subject matter might be deemed too risky for advertisers. After several months of uncertainty, during which Wolper had already been busy hiring producers and scriptwriters, the newly arrived ABC programming director Fred Silverman, who had just led rival CBS to first place in prime time, gave *Roots* the go ahead. The network, Silverman said, would budget the production at \$6 million, and ordered Wolper to produce an unprecedented 12 hours – 6 more than the filmmaker had anticipated.<sup>33</sup>

By the mid-1970s, the miniseries had been a relatively new format, though one that had been swiftly embraced by network programmers as an alternative to the monotony of weekly series – not to mention one that was a relatively low-risk commitment: if a particular series turned out to be a flop, it would at least be a short-lived flop. Though the limited series had been tried on network television in the past (as we have seen with *Crusade in Europe*), the 1969 broadcast of BBC's twenty six-part serialization of *The Forsyte Saga* on National Educational Television (NET) had sparked renewed interest in the form among the commercial networks. Convinced that the “novel for television” concept could attract a large and loyal audience – if only for a short time – ABC, at the direction of Barry Diller, purchased rights to Leon Uris' bestselling novel *QBVII*, a story of a slander trial in England, developing it as a two-part movie broadcast

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<sup>33</sup> Wolper and Troupe, *The Inside Story of T.V.'s 'Roots,'* 35-51; Sally Bedell, *Up the Tube: Prime-Time TV and the Silverman Years* (New York: Viking, 1981), 168-69; David Wolper to Fred Silverman, July 3, 1975, box 104, folder 24, The David Wolper Center, University of Southern California Libraries.

on consecutive evenings.<sup>34</sup> Its critical and commercial success led ABC to start development on several other adaptations, including John Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* trilogy, and nonfiction works like Joseph Lash's *Eleanor and Franklin*, and Gore Vidal's *Burr*.<sup>35</sup> The wisdom of this strategy soon became apparent after the twelve-hour, six-part adaptation of Irwin Shaw's 1970 novel *Rich Man, Poor Man*, a story of sibling rivalry spanning a quarter century and starring Peter Strauss and Nick Nolte, proved to be a smash hit for the network.<sup>36</sup>

Designed to present audiences with a completed narrative arc with a beginning, middle, and end, the new miniseries appeared more like extended cinematic productions rather than typical TV fare. Particularly appealing to audiences was the miniseries' ability to emphasize character development over a sustained, though limited period of time. As audience members became absorbed by a miniseries, as they spent increasingly long periods of time watching their development, they became more emotionally invested in a set of characters – more so than they would with a typical serial drama. As one *Roots* viewer would later write of her experience watching the story of Haley's family unfold over eight successive evenings on television, "time equals impact. The more time one spends with characters ... the more involved one becomes with them."<sup>37</sup> The prospect of performing a rounded character in the space of a few episodes, meanwhile, appealed to top-flight film talent, who didn't necessarily want to become tied to a continuing series.

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<sup>34</sup> John de Vito and Frank Tropea, *Epic Television Miniseries: A Critical History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2010), 9-29; Bedell, *Up the Tube*, 168.

<sup>35</sup> Les Brown, "ABC-TV Plans to Stress Serialization of Novels," *New York Times*, December 14, 1974.

<sup>36</sup> Gary Edgerton, *The Columbia History of American Television* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 295; Les Brown, "Notes: 'Rich Man, Poor Man' Starts Trend," *New York Times*, March 21, 1976, 79; Sander Vancour, "Narrative Programming: Overcoming TV's Mental 'Block'?" *Washington Post*, September 19, 1976, K1.

<sup>37</sup> Julie Coleman to David Wolper, February 2, 1977, box 288, folder 001, The David Wolper Center, University of Southern California Libraries.

This effectively extended the range of casting for television production companies. As the *New York Times* critic John O'Connor observed, however, miniseries still tended towards the melodramatic, "audience-grabbing" conventions and crutches characteristic of network television.<sup>38</sup>

The success of *Rich Man, Poor Man* in the winter of 1976 likely soothed anxieties at ABC over the network's massive investment in *Roots*. Still, there was much concern that a series would flop if it were perceived by a predominantly white TV audience to be a show about black history. Conscientious of how audience perceptions of race could sink the show's ratings, Wolper and his production staff decided early on that their adaptation of Haley's book would need to feature enlarged roles for white characters – even though the white characters in the book had been lean. Further, they decided that all actors – black and white – would need to be selected according to their familiarity and acceptability to white viewers. "That's why we picked Ed Asner, Sandy Duncan, Lloyd Bridges, Chuck Connors, Lorne Greene, Cicely Tyson, Ben Vereen, and Leslie Uggams, all known TV actors," Wolper explained. "This was planned like this, because again here, we were trying to reach the maximum white audience."<sup>39</sup>

Particularly illustrative of working assumptions about the sensibilities of white audience members and of white standards of beauty was the process around the all-important character of Kunta Kinte. To fill the role, casting director Lynn Stalmaster had decided that an unknown actor would provide the audience with a new face with whom they could make an emotional connection. From a wide search of dozens of applicants,

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<sup>38</sup> John J. O'Connor, "TV's Mini-Series – Refreshing Change, or Just Less of the Same?" *New York Times*, March 27, 1977, 59.

<sup>39</sup> Wolper and Troupe, *The Inside Story of T.V.'s 'Roots,'* 148.

Levar Burton, a nineteen-year-old drama student from the University of Southern California, stood out. “He was dynamite! Blew us all right out of there!” recalled Margulies of Burton’s performance at an early screen test. But not only did Burton give a solid audition, his dark skin also made him “look” more African than the other finalists.<sup>40</sup> It was this same quality, however, that had some at ABC hesitant to agree to Burton in the role. According to one report, people at the network felt that Burton was too unattractive for the lead role, and that his lips were “too thick.” According Matthew Delmont, who wrote about the incident in his 2016 book on *Roots*, ABC’s objections “speaks to the challenge of casting *Roots* in an industry and a country where racist ideals of beauty are deeply ingrained.”<sup>41</sup> Eventually, the network assented to Wolper, Margulies, and Stalmaster’s pick.

The concern for the sensibilities of the white audience also had an appreciable impact on plot elements and characterization in the series, leading to some noticeable divergences from Haley’s book. Chief among these, were the interactions between the white characters Thomas Davies (Ed Asner), captain of the slave ship *Lord Ligoiner*, and his Third Mate, Mr. Slater (Ralph Waite) that played out over the first two episodes. Though only minor figures in Haley’s book, for the series, their roles were expanded for two main reasons: First, to include recognizable white characters in the crucial first hours of the series, and second, to show varying attitudes of whites towards slavery.

Introduced as a decent and deeply religious man who prefers to set sail on the sabbath because it “seems like the Christian thing to do,” Davies appears as a sympathetic character, innocent of the slave trade and visibly disconcerted when he

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*; Matthew F. Delmont, *Making Roots*, 105-7.

learns that his new command, the *Lord Ligonier*, will be carrying slaves from West Africa to Annapolis. Slater, in contrast, is presented as a rough and amoral man, fully immersed in the slave trade. The differences between their attitudes towards the slavery are apparent in an early scene in the first episode in which the two men are at work reviewing the ship's inventory before launch. As Slater piles manacles and neck braces on Davies' desk, the captain can be seen eyeing the equipment distastefully, but dutifully records the numbers of the implements in his log book. When presented with a set of hand screws that will be taken on the voyage, however, Davies asks if they are necessary. "They have an advantage to them, sir," replies Slater, explaining how thumb screws are a reliable method of punishing slaves, especially women, "without marring the skin and knocking down the purchase price." When Davies asks Slater if he has ever seen the effects of thumb screws before, the Third Mate responds in the affirmative. Then, with a leering smile, he adds that a slave woman most likely wouldn't be "purchased for the way her thumbs look." Though shocked by this response, and by Slater's cold and sadistic attitude towards their human cargo, Davies proves quite willing to defer the more distasteful aspects of their voyage to the more experienced hand. Later in the episode, after he learns that Slater has made eighteen voyages "like this one," Davies admits to his mate that "below deck, let's say, you're the expert."<sup>42</sup>

Increasingly torn between his sense of duty and his moral principles as the voyage continues, Davies retreats to his quarters to write a letter to his wife confessing his regret at taking the command. Narrating as he writes, Davies express his sorrow at being so long away from his family. When his thoughts turn to the nature of his crisis of

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<sup>42</sup> *Roots*. "Episode 1." Directed by David Greene (1977; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc., 2011), DVD.



conscience, he can't bring himself to say it out loud, instead lowering his head to his hand in an expression of exhaustion and defeat. Moments later, Slater enters the cabin to present Davies with a terrified, quivering young black girl that he thought the captain might like as a "belly warmer." Sticking to his principles, Davies at first insists that he does "not approve of fornication." In the end, however, he relents and accepts the young woman while quietly appealing to heaven.<sup>43</sup>

The scene marks the climax of Davies' gradual capitulation to the racist and dehumanizing enterprise in which he is engaged. Still, his prolonged resistance, and his commitment to his moral principles in spite of his work and Slater's constant needling, the white audience is meant to pity him and identify him as an avatar of white middle-class opposition to slavery – even as he eventually succumbs to its pressures. Indeed, in explaining the rationale for expanding the Davies character for the series beyond what Haley had included in his book, lead scriptwriter William Blinn affirmed that, while "it is clearly absurd to have a likable slave ship captain," it was "equally unwise, we thought, to do four hours of television without showing a white person with whom we could identify." Clearly, Davies' narrative arc, his existential crisis and eventual fall, had been specifically designed with the desires and sensibilities of middle-class white viewers in mind.<sup>44</sup>

Following Wolper and Blinn's published statements about the imperatives of catering to white television audiences, media scholars Lauren Tucker and Hemant Shah maintained that the appearance of recognized television actors like Asner and Waite

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Blinn quoted in Wolper and Troupe, *The Inside Story of T.V.'s 'Roots,'* 48. See also Leslie Fishbein, "Roots: Docudrama and the Interpretation of History," in *American History/American Television: Interpreting the Video Past*, ed. John E. O'Connor (New York: Frank Unger Publishing, 1983, 283-84.

(whom contemporary viewers would have recognized as Lou Grant from *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, and John, Sr. from *The Waltons*, respectively) served as a means of cushioning white audience members from the negative portrayals of white characters involved in the slave trade. “By creating and emphasizing white characters who are caring and sensitive,” Tucker and Shah write, TV’s *Roots* “appears to exonerate whites and white institutions of any moral or ethical responsibility.”<sup>45</sup>

Still, while the expanded role of white characters in the Wolper/ABC adaptation of Haley’s novel may have “reassured viewers that ... nothing too serious would happen on either side of the set,” as the Afro-American Studies scholar Russell Adams observed in a 1980 article on *Roots*, the series wasn’t always easy for white audience members to watch.<sup>46</sup> “After the two hour segment was over I hated myself for being white,” one viewer from Michigan wrote, “I was ashamed for the way the white man treated the black, it was very upsetting.” Another from Tennessee wrote, “it was so moving to just look into ones past and live as they had to live. My God, these people had to go through years of living hell. And mostly because of the white race.” She continued, “although I am white, I can look back now and after seeing what we put the Indians through and now these people too ... well, I’m not so proud anymore.”<sup>47</sup> Other white viewers wrote to express their hopes that the series’ emotional power would foment a widespread change in behavior and culture. “We are a white upper-middle class family of six,” wrote one mother from Houston, “watching *Roots* had a profoundly moving effect on all of us. I

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<sup>45</sup> Lauren R. Tucker and Hemant Shah, “Race and the Transformation of Culture: The Making of the Television Miniseries *Roots*,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 9 (1992), 332.

<sup>46</sup> Russell L. Adams, “An Analysis of the <<Roots>> Phenomenon in the Context of American Racial Conservatism,” *Présence Africaine*, no. 116 (1980), 134.

<sup>47</sup> Linda Boyle to Producers of *Roots*, January 24, 1977, box 288, folder 001, The David L. Wolper Collection, University of Southern California Libraries; Joyce White to ABC NY, January 30, 1977, box 288, folder 001, The David L. Wolper Collection, University of Southern California Libraries.

believe that quite possibly a behavioral change in attitude may occur across the nation from this film.” Further, she confessed that “suddenly, I am so proud of our black Americans. *Roots* showed family ideals of Love, Pride, and Goodness for All of us to live by.”<sup>48</sup>

That so many white letter writers admitted to their own ignorance of slavery and the historical experience of African Americans through Reconstruction demonstrates that, for some white viewers at least, watching *Roots* was a consciousness-raising experience – though whether that experience inspired any of them to do anything beyond writing their local television stations is unclear.

For other white viewers, however, even the presence of recognized TV personalities wasn’t enough to distract from what they felt to be an excessively negative portrayal of whites. After explaining that she only had watched the series out of concern for the representation of whites when she discovered that the *Roots* miniseries would depict “blacks in chains,” an Ohio woman wrote to Wolper asking “why did you have to go to such extremes to portray every white character in the story except one as totally viscious [*sic*], cruel, inhuman, unfair and downright mean?” Further, citing Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*, she continued to explain that “many southern people did not hold with slavery and the ones who did rarely were ever cruel to slaves.” Convinced of the inflammatory effects of the series based on her own anecdotal experience on the campus of Miami University of Ohio, which she attended as a student, the writer closed her letter by saying “as the black people in this country watched this program it deepened their hate and renewed their desire to strike back at those who robbed them of their

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<sup>48</sup> Mrs. M. J. Mulvahill to ABC NY, January 31, 1977, box 288, folder 001, The David L. Wolper Collection, University of Southern California Libraries.

culture. The struggle for improvement in black-white relations has been dealt a severe blow by your short-sightedness.”<sup>49</sup> A viewer on Long Island had similar concerns about the series’ effect on race relations: “Your program *Roots* instead of bringing blacks [*sic*] & white races closer, have widened the gap! No wonder, it was completely one-sided never showing a good white person.” Reiterating the “good slaveowners” myth, she continued, “it is history, that some of the slave owners were very good to their slaves, to the point where the blacks were freed, *some* did not want to leave their masters!”<sup>50</sup> “Eight hours of Black propaganda,” another wrote. “A worse example of ‘anti-white’ radical, militant Hero-Black male has not (never) been placed in a mass media!”<sup>51</sup> Former California governor and future president of the United States Ronald Reagan, meanwhile, had also expressed his criticism of the *Roots* miniseries. He was quoted in the *Washington Post* as saying, “Very frankly, I thought the bias of all the good people being one color and all the bad people being another was rather destructive.”<sup>52</sup>

Other critical letters from white viewers articulated distinctly conspiratorial and white supremacist rhetoric. One California man noted that “*Roots* cheated the cause of Caucasian people world-wide. We hold Mr. Wolper personally responsible for every Caucasian child who is unborn because of the brainwashing effects of his white mother.” An Arizona couple, meanwhile, wrote how they were “still wondering how in the world you had to the nerve to produce that pile of garbage. There was no sense in any of it – All you did was make the blacks look like a super-race – and that all the whites did, was

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<sup>49</sup> Mary E. Mink to David Wolper, February 17, 1977, box 288, folder 003, The David L. Wolper Collection, University of Southern California Libraries.

<sup>50</sup> Margaret Barry to *Roots*, ABC TV New York, February 10, 1977, box 288, folder 003, The David L. Wolper Collection, University of Southern California Libraries.

<sup>51</sup> Howard Shoemaker to ABC TV *Roots*, box 288, folder 003, The David L. Wolper Collection, University of Southern California Libraries.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Robert H. Williams, “Postscript,” *Washington Post*, February 14, 1977, A3.

wrong.” Another viewer was offended by the suggestion that Africans actually had a culture. “I was interested in reading *Roots* until last night! It appears that the African tribes had a civilization akin to the Greeks! The characters was [*sic*] stereotyped, predictable and of little historical value. I really cannot believe this was the way it was!”<sup>53</sup>

What these viewers had reacted against, was a new and jarring cultural representation of strong black characters on television that contradicted an entire history of sedimented assumptions and tropes caricaturing blacks that was rooted in the traditions of minstrelsy. Still, as a product of the predominantly white entertainment industry, such new representations – although emotionally powerful and inspiring to both blacks and whites alike – contributed to a usable past that was more or less moderate in its presentation. With Haley as author and consultant, and with Wolper and his team of predominantly white writers, directors, and producers, the TV miniseries *Roots* modulated an “unstable equilibrium” between images crafted by black and white cultural producers, which Jannette Dates and William Barlow have called a “split image.”<sup>54</sup>

### *Roots and American Memory*

As a counter-memory of American slavery, *Roots* primarily emphasized themes of culture, family, and masculinity over its twelve-hours of content. Highlighting the centrality of the family in the series, the opening scenes of the premier episode, set in the

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<sup>53</sup> Ronald Guggenheim to David Wolper, February 28, 1979, box 288, folder 003, The David L. Wolper Collection, University of Southern California Libraries; Ralph and Marion Stedman to Producers of Alex Haley’s *Roots* ABC Television, n.d. box 288, folder 003, The David L. Wolper Collection, University of Southern California Libraries; Bill Dito to ABC, January 24, 1977, box 288, folder 003, The David L. Wolper Collection, University of Southern California Libraries.

<sup>54</sup> Jannette L. Dates and William Barlow, “Introduction: A War of Images” in *Split Image: African Americans in the Mass Media* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1990), 3.

village of Juffure in the Gambia in 1750, focuses on the birth of Kunta Kinte to his parents, Omoro (Thalmus Rasulala) and Binta (Cicely Tyson). It is a moment in which the whole village is involved, and after the first infant cries are heard, a knot of Juffure women join Omoro, Binta, and midwife Nyo Boto (Maya Angelou) in welcoming the baby to the world. In the following scene, Omoro approaches a village elder Brima Cesay (Harry Rhodes) to inquire about the best way to name the child. Cesay, however, notes that the problem of naming the child belongs to Omoro alone. Not long after, Binta informs the village that her husband has decided on a name for the child, whereupon Omoro, following the long-standing custom of the Mandinka people, brings the child to a clearing in the jungle and raises him high before the night sky, proclaiming, “Behold, the only thing greater than yourself!” The scenes of Kunta Kinte’s birth and naming elaborate the extent of the Mandinka people’s ancient culture, contradicting Mr. Slater’s later assurances to Captain Davies that African tribal peoples have no culture of their own, no religion, and no language: “just grunts and groans.” White justification for enslaving blacks based on their inferior – or nonexistent – culture is revealed as the convenient myth of the exploiter.<sup>55</sup>

The episode then moves ahead to the year 1765, and we see Kunta as a teenager responsible for his family goats. When a leopard kills one of the goats under Kunta’s charge, the young man goes down to the river to report to his father the bad news. While Omoro at first appears angry, he eventually soothes his son’s anxieties by telling him that all men make mistakes. In these scenes, the Kinte family – Omoro, Binta, Kunta, and his younger siblings – are presented as an average nuclear structure not unfamiliar to

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<sup>55</sup> *Roots*. “Episode 1.” Directed by David Greene (1977; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc., 2011), DVD.

Americans in the late 1970s. Showing Omoro and Binta as concerned parents living in the same household, meanwhile, contradicted the image projected by the so-called Moynihan Report released in 1965 on “The Negro Family.” In it, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a sociologist and who was then serving as the assistant secretary of Labor for the Johnson administration had studied the causes and sources of poverty among African Americans and had reported that the high rate of single parent (notably single mothers) households among African Americans – a legacy of the breaking up of black families under slavery – would continue to be an obstacle to economic prosperity. In contrast to this image of the black family, the Kinte family in Juffure was portrayed as a loving and caring group, and Omoro specifically, presented as a figure of authority within the household and a parent deeply concerned about the development of his oldest son, Kunta.<sup>56</sup>

Now fifteen years of age, Kunta is also eligible for the Mandinka rite of male passage, which involves a separation from his family. Kunta and other boys of the village are taken to an undisclosed location in the jungle where they are initiated into male adulthood and into the responsibilities and values exemplified by a Mandinka warrior. The lead elder, Kintango, informs the frightened boys that any who fail to complete the training – which includes ritual circumcision – will be treated as children for the rest of their lives. After surviving the manhood training, Kunta returns to his village with a new sense of pride and identity, one which forbids him to take orders from a woman, as he curtly notifies his mother after she asks him to help his father. Though berated by his

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<sup>56</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Foreword,” in *Reconsidering Roots*, eds. Erica L. Ball and Kellie Carter Jackson (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2017), xii; United States Department of Labor Office of Policy Planning and Research, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1965).

grandmother for his show of disrespect toward his mother soon after, the belief that a Mandinka warrior should not be ordered about by a woman informs Kunta's relationships with women – especially his wife Bell – throughout the remainder of the series.

Captured by slavers soon after completing the rigorous rites of the Mandinka warriors, Kunta clings to the Mandinka concept of manhood as a core part of his identity, which he refuses to relinquish when he arrives in the New World. Against the brutalization, humiliations, and emasculations of his life as a slave in Virginia, he stubbornly refuses to submit his will to that of his new masters, the Spotsylvania County farmer John Reynolds (Lorne Greene). Even at the urging of his new friend, Fiddler (Louis Gossett, Jr.), who tries to convince Kunta that obsequiousness, flattery, and “playing dumb” will ensure survival – in short, playing to white slaveholders’ expectations of black inferiority – Kunta refuses to submit, staging several attempts to escape. Kunta's sense of determination, self-esteem and self-mastery, meanwhile, forms the background for one of the most powerful scenes in the series – and likely the most powerful scene in all of American television history. After running away for a second time, Kunta, who has until this time refused to accept his slave name, Toby, is tied to a whipping post by the Reynolds overseer Ames (Vic Morrow), a hard man with much experience “breaking slaves.” After having Kunta whipped by an assistant for several minutes, and commanding Kunta to give his name, Kunta finally relents, accepting the name “Toby.”<sup>57</sup>

Instead of the unconditionally subservient slave, then, Kunta Kinte is presented as honorable and stouthearted, even if a bit prideful, and has heroically insisted on his own

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<sup>57</sup> *Roots*. “Episode 2.” Directed by David Greene (1977; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc., 2011), DVD.



identity for the better part of four hours. That he eventually relents under the lash does not in the least undermine his determination, his sense of self or his desire for freedom. In the following episode, “Toby,” now 30 years old, attempts to escape one last time. When he is eventually caught, however, the slave catchers decide to prevent any further runaway attempts by cutting off half of Kunta’s foot. Even with this handicap, Kunta attempts to run away one final time, though this time, as the husband of the Reynolds cook Bell (Madge Sinclair) and the father of newborn infant Kizzy, he decides to remain with his family. The sense of family bond, and the desire to stay together thus finally won out over the individual desire to be free.<sup>58</sup>

While the individual actions of Kunta Kinte may have disrupted the traditional image of the African slave in American culture, so too did the regular historical bulletins as discussed within slave quarters. One such moment, as Matthew Delmont has observed, appeared in a scene between Fiddler and Bell set at the close of the American Revolution. After Bell had noted how the white folks had been celebrating over the British surrender, Fiddler responds wryly, “I’ve been worrying and tossing at night about them getting their freedom, been the mostst thing on my mind.” As Delmont writes, the exchange “unsettles the usual chronology of American history, marking the nation’s independence day as just one of the thousands of days before and after the Revolutionary War that black people were held in bondage.”<sup>59</sup>

The theme of family continuity continues through the final episode of the series. Set in the period immediately following the Civil War, the episode focuses on Kunta

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<sup>58</sup> *Roots*. “Episode 3.” Directed by Marvin J. Chomsky (1977; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc., 2011), DVD.

<sup>59</sup> Matthew F. Delmont, *Making Roots*, 170.

Kinte's great-grandson Tom Murray (Georg Stanford Brown) and their struggle to navigate the difficult new realities of freedom in the postwar South. But while Tom, his family, and the other former slaves on the Harvey plantation are now free and committed to shaping their own destiny, whites are determined to keep the former slaves oppressed. The local whites under the leadership of Senator Justin (Burl Ives) and former Confederate Army officer Evan Brent (Lloyd Bridges) conspire to keep the former slaves, now sharecroppers, in poverty and terror: While Justin, a carpetbagger, begins to buy the land of former plantation owners cheaply, Brent and his associates organize a band of hooded "night riders" to constantly harass the black folks on the former Harvey plantation.<sup>60</sup>

One day, Tom's father, Chicken George (Ben Vereen), returns home from the war, in which he had been fighting for the Union. He proclaims to his family that he knows of land in western Tennessee that he has secured with some of his Army pay. He convinces his family to move out to the land together, where they can escape the terrorizing of Brent and his riders and farm their own land. Packing their belongings into a wagon train, Chicken George, Tom, and the whole family move west. When they arrive on their land, Chicken George pulls one of the younger boys aside, and standing on a hilltop, recounts to him the story of Kunta Kinte and his arrival in the New World from Africa.

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<sup>60</sup> *Roots*. "Episode 6." Directed by Marvin J. Chomsky (1977; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc., 2011), DVD.

### *Watching Roots*

Still concerned about its commercial success, ABC director of programming Fred Silverman decided in November of 1976 – just two months from the series premier – to schedule *Roots* on eight consecutive nights, rather than their original plan of presenting one episode a week for twelve weeks. The abbreviated schedule, network executives reasoned, would limit ABC's exposure in case *Roots* turned out to be a major flop. Recalled Silverman, "the reasons we thought it was a 'high-risk' project were that it was black, and it was about a part of our history and culture that a lot of people would like to think never existed." But "to my way of thinking," he continued, *Roots* "had an emotional wallop, and if it were to have maximum impact on television, the audience really had to be swept emotionally into the story and into the lives of its people."<sup>61</sup> On its own, the schedule change had been unprecedented in American television. No other dramatic series had been scheduled for twelve hours over eight nights. Wolper, though surprised by the network's decision, claimed to have been delighted. "I thought that was terrific. Eight consecutive nights gives it the feel of an important event, and makes the audience feel that it is something not to be missed. After all," he added, "they can always see another episode of *Bionic Woman*."<sup>62</sup>

The social experience of watching the show as it was broadcast on ABC over those eight nights in January often came up in fan letters written to Wolper and Haley (and failing that, to ABC's New York headquarters, or to local stations). Some viewers described watching with immediate family. A white, middle-class mother of six from Houston wrote that she and her family had watched the entire series together. "Watching

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<sup>61</sup> Quoted in Wolper and Troupe, *The Inside Story of T.V.'s 'Roots,'* 137-38.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

*Roots*,” she wrote, “had a profoundly moving effect on all of us.” Others reported extensive viewership among friends and neighbors. One condominium-dweller in Miami Beach, Florida noted that, in her building, “whomever I spoke to, they were all following station WABC showing *Roots*. It is the talk of our town.” She continued, “As you know, living in a warm climate and people usually do not sit at home especially on a Saturday and Sunday evening but this was an exception.” While the cold snap that chilled the east coast during *Roots* week was often posited as a reason for the series’ success, viewers around the country were clearly tuning in. Watching *Roots* within public audiences at times occasioned unexpected reactions. As a *New York Times* article on the phenomenon reported, one night in a Harlem bar, “viewers got so angry over the treatment of Kunt[a] Kinte that they would not allow the juke box to be turned on even after the show had ended.” Bar patrons simply wanted to sit and discuss the episode.<sup>63</sup>

Whether in a Harlem bar, a Las Vegas hotel, a brownstone, a church, a fraternity house, or a suburban living room, the ritual of gathering in front of the television screen – either as individuals or groups – indicates a distinctive configuration of television as something more than a cultural object, but rather the kind of social “environment” that cultural historian Cecilia Tichi, among many others, has called the “electronic hearth.” For Tichi, associations between television and the domestic hearth have been historically constructed by media and technology companies, as well as journalists and other writers, as a way of suggesting meaningful continuities between traditional domestic values that are symbolized by the family fireplace and the new technological object in the home.

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<sup>63</sup> M.J. Mulvahill to ABC NY, January 31, 1977, box 288, folder 001, The David L. Wolper Collection, University of Southern California Libraries; Sylvia Rosenblatt to ABC NY, February 1, 1977, box 288, folder 001, The David L. Wolper Collection, University of Southern California Libraries; Charlayne Hunter-Gault, “‘Roots’ Getting a Grip on People Everywhere,” *New York Times*, January 28, 1977, B5.

Domesticity, warmth, family togetherness, patriotism, “all the historically accumulated associations of the American domestic hearth are reproduced in the television.”<sup>64</sup> An examination of *Roots* within this frame suggests a specific cultural practice associated with the hearth/television: its role as a space in which a transfer of traditions and values occur, and where a society’s stories, myths, and memories are passed between generations.

That *Roots* was a cultural text that offered this kind of participation in the form of a limited television series is quite evident from viewer responses (e.g. fan mail, letters to local newspapers), and also from the response among educators and civic officials nationwide. Broadcast at a time in which there was a growing interest (particularly among whites) in Black Studies and African American history in American colleges and universities, the value of *Roots* as an informative, national and educational text was recognized by the nearly 200 of such institutions that incorporated the series into their curricula. At Miami-Dade Community College, for instance, where a special course in Black Studies had been specifically designed with *Roots* in mind, professors Martin Rein and Jeffrey Elliot elaborated on the “breakthrough” significance that the series would have for educators nationwide: “the present lack of knowledge concerning black history is readily apparent. It is through television programs such as *Roots* that much of this ignorance can be dispelled.”<sup>65</sup> This appropriation of *Roots* as a course text marked a

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<sup>64</sup> Cecilia Tichi, *Electronic Hearth: Creating an American Television Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 43.

<sup>65</sup> Martin Rein and Jeffrey M. Elliot, “Roots: A New Approach to Teaching Black History,” *Negro History Bulletin* 40, no. 1 (1977): 667.

significant achievement for Wolper and the network, who had set out with the purpose of putting the series in front of the largest audience possible.<sup>66</sup>

As for the power of its visual history, viewers wrote Wolper and local ABC networks to express their appreciation for the authenticity and accuracy that they saw in *Roots*. “You proved television can offer us some quality, if it wants to!!! And history can be downright entertaining,” one viewer enthused. Another wrote that “it was fun learning history from television ... learning history from television is better than learning about it in school.” A viewer from Cleveland, meanwhile, was assured that “you showed us the ugly and horrible slave trading business in its true light ... I’ve studied [four] college course[s] in black history and I’m sure you showed us as it was.”<sup>67</sup>

As the television historian Erik Barnouw observed, the widespread popularity of *Roots* had turned entrenched industry notions about the “mass audience” and its preferences on its head. Its production “took steps that had long seemed beyond practical possibility,” and was set within the “spirit of reexamination and rededication furthered by the Bicentennial.”<sup>68</sup> This exploration, however, was underlined by two features of the electronic hearth, which simultaneously provided a space for the extended American family to connect with a long-marginalized group, but which did so in a television context that had formed deeply contradictory images of race.

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<sup>66</sup> Wolper and Troupe, *The Inside Story of T.V.’s ‘Roots,’* 149.

<sup>67</sup> Mrs. Michael Hardman to ABC-TV New York, February 2, 1977, box 288, folder 001, The David L. Wolper Collection, University of Southern California Libraries; Stacie Gerken to David Wolper, February 16, 1977, box 284, folder 001, The David L. Wolper Collection, University of Southern California Libraries; Eileen Zelizer to ABC-TV Network, January 31, 1977, box 288, folder 001, The David L. Wolper Collection, University of Southern California Libraries.

<sup>68</sup> Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 466.

*After Roots*

After *Roots* phenomenal success in the winter of 1977, the series was nominated for 37 Prime-Time Emmys, and winning nine, including Outstanding Limited Series, Outstanding Writing in a Drama series, and several for individual performances. A year later, ABC followed the series with a sequel, *Roots: The Next Generations*, which brought the story of Alex Haley's family down to the author himself, who was played by James Earl Jones. In 2016, under executive producers LeVar Burton and Mark Wolper (David Wolper's son), the series was remade for the A+E Networks.

## **Chapter Five: Ken Burns and the American Epic**

*There is no single truth in war.*

- Tag line for *The Vietnam War*<sup>1</sup>

In their introduction to *The Vietnam War: An Intimate History*, the companion volume to their 10-part, 18-hour PBS documentary series *The Vietnam War* (2017), Ken Burns and Lynn Novick shared a bit of the philosophy that had guided their approach to this traumatic, contradictory, and still contentious period in American history. “From the start,” they wrote, “we vowed to each other that we would avoid the limits of a binary political perspective and the shortcuts of conventional wisdom and superficial history. This was a war of *many* perspectives ... we wished to try to contain and faithfully reflect those seemingly irreconcilable outlooks.”<sup>2</sup> Burns has always believed in the synthetic power of film, its ability to accommodate diverse perspectives through the juxtaposition of documentary sources and on-screen interviews.<sup>3</sup> With nearly 80 such interviews in the film – including conversations with American veterans, officials, journalists, and antiwar demonstrator; but also, significantly with Vietnamese veterans and civilians from both the north and south of the country – *The Vietnam War* set out to present the conflict not as a monolithic narrative, but a diversity of experiences, giving an emotional valence to the series’ tag line: that in war, there is no single truth. Still, through all of these

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<sup>1</sup> “About,” *PBS.org*, accessed February 21, 2019, <http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/the-vietnam-war/about/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, introduction to *The Vietnam War: An Intimate History*, ed. Geoffrey C. Ward (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017), xi.

<sup>3</sup> See David Thelen, “The Movie Maker as Historian: Conversations with Ken Burns,” *The Journal of American History* 81, no. 3 (December 1994), 1040-42; and Ken Burns, “Four O’Clock in the Morning Courage,” in *Ken Burns’s The Civil War: Historians Respond*, ed. Robert Brent Toplin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 170.



perspectives, a kind of Burnsian consensus emerged, one that reconciled the diversity of participants' experiences into a human drama of war, tragedy, and redemption.

In a career spanning four decades, Ken Burns has become one of the most celebrated producer-directors in American television and one of the country's foremost popular historians. Beginning with standalone films like *Brooklyn Bridge* (1982), *Huey Long* (1986), and *The Congress* (1989), and continuing through *The Civil War* (1990) to include other multi-part series like *Baseball* (1994), *Jazz* (2001), *The War* (2007), and *The Roosevelts* (2014), Burns has been a prolific chronicler of Americana, whose filmic histories have been enjoyed by millions of television viewers in the United States and around the world. Over the years, his films have won fifteen Emmys and two Oscar nominations, and Burns himself has been the recipient of a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences.<sup>4</sup>

In their style and approach to American history, Burns's films have typically been noted for their epic dimensions.<sup>5</sup> Especially after the release of *The Civil War* in 1990, most have been multipart series, allowing the filmmaker to stage extensive engagements with his subject matter. But beyond their elongated run-time, the literary quality of Burns's oeuvre and his abiding interest in themes of heroism, morality, and the nation, are generally consistent with the Homeric model. Indeed, as Burns himself explained in a 1995 interview with *American Historical Review*, "I believe that history ought to be sung, that Homer, the Homeric mode is an important one, that you need to sing the epic verses,

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<sup>4</sup> "Ken Burns." Kenburns.com, accessed April 2, 2019, <http://kenburns.com/principals/ken-burns/>

<sup>5</sup> See for example, David Thomson, "History Composed with Film," *Film Comment* 25, no. 5 (1990), 12; Richard Zoglin, "Baseball Homer Epic," *Time*, September 12, 1994, <https://bit.ly/2SnEbK7>; Matthew Melton, "Ken Burns' 'Civil War': Epic Narrative and Public Moral Argument," *Sync: The Regent Journal of Film and Video* 1, no. 2 (1994): 28-35; Charles Storch, "Ken Burns on WWII," *Chicago Tribune*, July 25, 2007, <https://bit.ly/2Tf3ulZ>; Gary Edgerton, *Ken Burns's America* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 8-9.

and the way we do that is around this ‘electronic campfire’” of television.<sup>6</sup> Rather than construct top-down narratives centering on the actions of “great” men and women, however – the equivalents of Agamemnon, Achilles, or Odysseus – Burns’s epics are far more democratic, including not only the perspectives of presidents and generals, but also of ordinary men and women, whose experiences would most likely resonate with contemporary viewers, and thereby contribute to a more complex telling of national history.

As noted in Chapter 2 of this study, the epic has typically been defined as a long narrative composition, elevated or “serious” in style, which recounts the story of a hero (or heroes), whose exploits are central to the emergence of a community or national consciousness, and which is often grounded in the supernatural or the sublime. For Burns, it is an ideal literary-historical mode in which to reflect upon and define the constitution of the nation. “People without a past are not a people,” he has argued, and to his great lament, the bulk of academic history has failed to provide popular audiences with the kind of historical understanding necessary for inculcating a greater cultural awareness of “where we’ve been” that might tell us “where we’re going.” The kind of history he wants to construct, Burns avers, is that of the “great pageant of everything that has come before this moment.”<sup>7</sup> Creating histories on the basis of synthesis and cohesion, as he has repeatedly argued, can function as a kind of “tonic,” or “something that has the possibility of healing the great divisions that bedevil our country today.”<sup>8</sup> Healing divisions, however, does not mean glossing over them: indeed, the historical lesson that

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<sup>6</sup> Burns quoted in Thomas Cripps, “Historical Truth: An Interview with Ken Burns,” *American Historical Review* 100, no. 3 (June 1995), 749.

<sup>7</sup> Burns quoted in Thelen, “The Movie Maker as Historian,” 1032.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 1048.

emerges in both *The Civil War* and *The Vietnam War* is that the American people have weathered tragedy and crisis in their past, crises that seemed to threaten the very existence of the nation. In Burns's hands, the American historical epic is not simply a mythic metanarrative, but the story of the convergence of diverse individuals, experiences, and events into a cohesive, but pluralistic unity. Consistent with the conventions of the epic form, then, Burns's films are "encyclopedic" to the extent that he and his team understand history as the synthesis ("to contain and faithfully reflect") of a variety of different perspectives.<sup>9</sup> History, in this view, is a fundamentally democratic practice.

*The Vietnam War* was Burns's twenty-ninth documentary, and as some reviewers have noted, it seemed something of an outlier in relation to his previous work. With the use of CGI animated maps, satellite imagery, a Boomer-era soundtrack, and an abundance of contemporary video footage (supplementing Burns's characteristic use of film), the series presents a more aesthetically dynamic history than *The Civil War* or *Baseball* – though there is still ample usage of the celebrated "Ken Burns Effect" to dramatize period black-and-white photography. But the most distinctive contrast was the subject matter itself. As Ian Parker observed in a 2017 profile of Burns for the *New Yorker*, the Vietnam War "is not a room in the House of Americana."<sup>10</sup> Unlike Burns's other martial subjects, the Vietnam War is not accorded a place of honor and glory in American memory. More often, it is typically framed as a parable of imperial overreach. As the veteran and author Karl Marlantes explains in the first episode of the series, "for

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 1047.

<sup>10</sup> Ian Parker, "Ken Burns's American Canon," *The New Yorker*, September 4, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2elPzEs>.

years, nobody talked about Vietnam ... it was so divisive. It's like living in a family with an alcoholic father. *Shh*. We don't talk about that. Our country did that with Vietnam.”<sup>11</sup>

Freighted with such pain and trauma, the Vietnam War is an episode in American history that would seem to resist epic emplotment, a genre typically associated with grand, sweeping narratives that feature the definitive exploits of national heroes. The “quagmire” of Vietnam, in contrast, is often remembered more for its uncertainty – both in terms of American strategic aims and in terms of the actual, day-to-day fighting, in which there were no front lines and few pitched battles. Indeed, trying to discern exactly “what happened” – in both senses – was of central concern for the filmmakers.<sup>12</sup> Bitter division over American involvement in southeast Asia, and its tremendous cost in human life had been, and continued to be, deeply traumatic for the nation – but also, as Burns and Novick’s film demonstrate, for the Vietnamese.<sup>13</sup> For the filmmakers, the memory of the war had been like a “virus” that had infected American society, metastasizing in the body politic as a variety of critical impairments: acute polarization, a decline of civil discourse, and a suspicion of government leaders.<sup>14</sup>

Produced in the spirit of reconciliation – between Americans and Vietnamese, as well as among Americans themselves – *The Vietnam War* would be Burns’s attempt at collective therapy, an “attempt at some sort of vaccination” intended to mitigate the virus

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<sup>11</sup> *The Vietnam War*, episode 1, “Déjà vu (1858-1961),” directed by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, aired September 17, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, introduction to *The Vietnam War: An Intimate History*, ed. Geoffrey C. Ward (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> See also Fred Turner, *Echoes of Combat: The Vietnam War in American Memory* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996); Martia Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1997); Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

<sup>14</sup> Burns quoted in Karl Vick, “Ken Burns Takes on the Vietnam War,” *Time*, September 14, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2xmHjPs>.

of disunion.<sup>15</sup> Such an intervention is consistent with Burns's previous work. Describing the consensus he aimed to achieve, the filmmaker told *Time* magazine that "particularly today, when there's too much pluribus and not enough unum ... I'm very much involved in the unum, the stories we can share and that don't make demons of one another."<sup>16</sup> The result was a different kind of epic narrative – one that centered on more complicated notions of heroism and national identity, though one that still suggested the possibility of a meaningful consensus.

### *Film and History*

Kenneth Lauren Burns, born in Brooklyn, New York in 1953, developed an appreciation for photography at an early age. When he was only four months old, his father, Robert Burns, a doctoral candidate in anthropology at Columbia University, took Ken and his mother, Lyla, to the village of Saint-Véran in the French Alps for ten months where Robert was conducting dissertation research. While the family was in Saint-Véran, Robert gathered materials and photographs for an article about the village that was published in *National Geographic* a few years later.<sup>17</sup>

Although his father would never complete his Ph.D., in 1963, the elder Burns accepted a full-time faculty position at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Tragically, Lyla was diagnosed with breast cancer soon after the family returned from France and died in 1965 when Ken was just eleven years old and his younger brother Ric,

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<sup>15</sup> Burns quoted in Brett Milano, "A Film to 'Unpack' Vietnam," *The Harvard Gazette*, April 14, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2tKcBwN>. See also Holly Ramer, "Burns Sees Vietnam War as Virus, Documentary as Vaccination," *Stars and Stripes*, July 16, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2XoPYMf>.

<sup>16</sup> Burns quoted in Vick, "Ken Burns Takes on the Vietnam War."

<sup>17</sup> Edgerton, *Ken Burns's America*, 27-28; Robert K. Burns, Jr., "Saint-Véran," *National Geographic*, 1959, 573.

ten. Recalled Ken, “her cancer was the great forming force in my life, permanently influencing all that I would become.” After their mother’s death, Ken and Ric were mostly on their own, taking care of the house and a father who had long suffered from mental illness, and had become increasingly depressed.<sup>18</sup>

It was in Ann Arbor that young Burns became acquainted with Hollywood films, which became something of an outlet from his responsibilities at home. The town had an old-style theatre, at which were exhibited a variety of film revivals and imports, and which hosted regular film festivals. Especially memorable for the young movie buff were the pictures of Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks, and John Ford. Of these great directors, Ford proved particularly influential. As Burns recalled years later, “I realize how influential Ford was [for him] in that if you look at my whole body of work, it’s a kind of documentary version of Ford that is a real love for biography, a real love for American mythology.”<sup>19</sup>

In 1970, Burns enrolled in Hampshire College, a small liberal arts college in Massachusetts, which had only just opened in 1969. Though he had initially planned on studying anthropology like his father, while at Hampshire, Burns began to study filmmaking under the legendary documentarian Jerome Liebling and Elaine Mayes. From Liebling and Mayes, Burns learned how, through taking appropriate care and concern for its subject matter, documentary photography could be used to convey both a sense of empathy and drama. From Mayes, moreover, Burns learned of the power of a single image to communicate emotion and dynamism.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted in “Ken Burns,” *Biography Today*, January 1995, 69; Parker, “Ken Burns’s American Canon,”

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Edgerton, *Ken Burns’s America*, 29.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-33.

Burns's formative experience at Hampshire was crystalized in a 27-minute student film he produced for Massachusetts' Old Sturbridge Village, a living museum of early 19<sup>th</sup> century New England life on the order of Colonial Williamsburg. Titled *Working in Rural New England* (1976), the film captured Village reenactors performing the central tasks of New England farm life like husking corn, making cheese, sheering sheep, and forging iron. Demonstrating the influence of Liebling and evincing some of the techniques that would come to define his later works, *Working in Rural New England* made dramatic use of still photography, panning across a mural of New England from the 1830s, stopping to emphasize certain details. The film won Burns a National Historic Preservation Trust film award in 1977, but the experience of producing the film had also made Burns aware of his own interest in the subject of American history.<sup>21</sup>

Not long after he left Hampshire College, Burns began working on his first feature-length documentary film, *Brooklyn Bridge*, which had been inspired by Burns's reading of historian David McCullough's 1972 book *The Great Bridge*. It was the first production of the newly created film collective, Florentine Films, which Burns launched with fellow Hampshire alumni Buddy Squires and Roger Sherman (the name of the company was derived from the neighborhood in Northampton, Massachusetts where their professor and mentor Elaine Mayes lived with her husband, the photographer Bill Arnold).<sup>22</sup> Pre-production work for the film began in 1977, and provided Burns and company with real-life education in attracting sponsorship and consultants for a hour-long documentary. Though few of the hundreds of potential donors he contacted were willing to give the unknown and untested 23-year old filmmaker a chance, Burns was

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

eventually able to convince several institutional donors to underwrite his project. A bigger breakthrough, however, came when Burns and Squires attended an academic conference on the Brooklyn Bridge hosted by Skidmore college, at which Burns made important connections that would help him finish his film. Among those with which Burns interacted at the conference, was McCollough himself, who after several rejections, eventually agreed to give the young filmmaker his blessing and act as a consultant on the project, and eventually, its narrator. Of the experience, Burns recalled, “we developed all the skills used in subsequent projects.”<sup>23</sup>

It would take Burns and his team at Florentine Films – which now included his college girlfriend and soon-to-be wife Amy Stechler – nearly five years to produce *Brooklyn Bridge*, but when the project was finally completed in 1981 and aired on public television (he had made connections at WNET, New York through his dogged campaign of networking) in May 1982, it quickly became a critical success. Winning praise from audiences, critics, and scholars alike, *Brooklyn Bridge* was also nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary film in 1982 and helped Burns to establish a long-lasting relationship with PBS. The success of *Brooklyn Bridge* also provided Burns and Florentine Films with necessary social capital to produce more films, which soon included *The Shakers: Hands to Work, Hearts to God* (1984), *The Statue of Liberty* (1985), and *Huey Long* (1985), the latter of which became Burns’s first in a number of subsequent collaborations with historian Geoffrey Ward.

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<sup>23</sup> Therese Pasquale-Maguire, “Independent Filmmakers – It’s Tough, but Some Are Making It in Massachusetts,” *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, May 19, 1981, 4; Edgerton, *Ken Burns’s America*, 38-39.



*The Civil War*

The connections that Burns made through the early 1980s with these films, which included new funding streams as well as consulting support from academics like Ward, Alan Brinkley, William Leuchtenburg, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and Robert Snyder, the filmmaker began work on what would be a watershed project, his film series on the U.S. Civil War. As Burns tells the story, he first became interested in developing the series after finishing Michael Shaara's novel *Killer Angels*, about the battle of Gettysburg on Christmas Day, 1985. Excited by the prospect of a project of potentially epic proportions, Burns remembered thinking on that day that "although each of my previous films had been risky, each taking on a new or unfamiliar challenge, this new passion, to tell the whole story of the Civil War, would require all of the attention and bravery" that he could muster.<sup>24</sup>

For *The Civil War*, Burns once again assembled a team of academic consultants, although this time, the group was much larger, numbering roughly two dozen experts. The first meeting with the historians – whose ideological orientation ran from conservative to Marxist – in the fall of 1986 turned out to be quite contentious. As Burns recalled, during the course of that first meeting,

*several of the "new" historians were not convinced. For several hours they argued quite spitefully and belligerently, as if this early draft was the way it was going to turn out. In fact, it was the first of nearly twenty complete revisions. We pleaded and protested, insisted that we were corrigible, begged them to tell us what was missing, to no avail. It was a dark moment ... we had been attacked on our flank by those we considered our allies and it hurt. Finally, C. Vann Woodward, the great historian, who had been with us both days, and who had sat quietly through much of this rather embarrassing exchanged, looked at me and riveted the attention of everyone in the room, including the angry historians, many of whom were his former students. After a long silence he spoke: "Ken, we pedants hope that we don't get in the way of your telling this story well. What is it*

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<sup>24</sup> Burns, "Four O'Clock in the Morning Courage," 157.

*that we can do to help you tell this story better?" From that moment on, we had every one's help, some less begrudgingly offered than others.*<sup>25</sup>

What Burns aimed to do, was to take a more inclusive perspective on the Civil War than perhaps his consultants would have liked. In Burns's liberal-pluralist outlook, narrative history can encompass a variety of historiographical schools, instead choosing different moments, scenes, or segments within the larger narrative in which to emphasize particular perspectives in an organic way, but one which sought to present differing interpretations in an honest way. "We were hoping to tell a broad story, an American family portrait," Burns continued, "and we didn't need our history to subscribe to any particular polemic."<sup>26</sup>

From these consultants, and through their own research work, Ken Burns and his team amassed a wealth of primary source documents from which to construct their narrative framework: letters, diaries, journals, military communiques, and of course, period photographs. Like any academic historian, Burns and his team used these sources as building blocks from which to "feel my way to a kind of truth" about how the material should be presented. The research itself, Burns has noted, is done by a very small group of people, including himself. At times, the most powerful material comes to him serendipitously (as it does for all researchers). One of the most emotionally powerful set pieces of *The Civil War*, the letter of Sullivan Ballou to his wife before the first battle of Bull Run at which he was killed, came from the historian Don Fehrenbacher. The letter, Burns remembered, hit the team like a "neutron bomb." It was just the kind of individual,

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<sup>25</sup> Burns, "Four O'Clock in the Morning Courage," 171.

<sup>26</sup> Burns quoted in Thelen, "The Movie Maker as Historian: Conversations with Ken Burns," 1034.

first-person account that spoke to the vividness and diversity of the past, and which made American history so compelling for Burns.<sup>27</sup>

For Burns, research, writing, interviewing, and film editing are iterative and complex processes of interweaving different types of stories and scenes (Burns likens the process to alchemy). As he explains the process, it's typical that after three or four script revisions, and after the first round of interviews have been conducted and visual materials selected, the editing process begins. Burns's films are structured by four different kinds of scenes: First, there are "narratively critical" scenes, like specific battles or events which must be placed chronologically within the narrative. Second, are "emotional chapters," which center on first-person perspectives and the experiences of individuals – the common soldier or civilian – that aren't necessarily anchored to specific moments, but which can "float" between the more narratively critical scenes. Third, are what Burns calls "telegrams," which are also emotional, first-hand accounts, but are very short, and more tied to specific moments. "It's just sort of *there*, and it exists only for its moment."<sup>28</sup> Finally are what Gary Edgerton has called "editing clusters," which allow Burns a way of "critically analyzing the various sides of a theme, question, or controversy that is central to a better overall understanding of his subject."<sup>29</sup>

When it debuted in September 1990, some 40 million viewers tuned in to at least one installment of *The Civil War*, breaking all records for public television and defying the conventional wisdom that Burns's historical documentary would be "eaten alive" by

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 1035, 1037.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 1037.

<sup>29</sup> Edgerton, *Ken Burns's America*, 12.

its commercial competitors.<sup>30</sup> Moved by its intimacy and eloquence, the political columnist George Will proclaimed in a rare review of a television series, “our *Iliad* has found its Homer: [Ken Burns] has made accessible and vivid for everyone the pain and poetry and meaning of the event that is the hinge of our history.” Other reviewers had similar praise. For *Time* magazine’s Richard Zoglin, Burns’s series was “not just fine history but a pensive epic about the nation’s greatest catastrophe.” For Walter Goodman of the *New York Times*, it was “television drama of an epic order.” For the *Washington Post*’s Tom Shales, it was “heroic television,” which had combined a “new intimacy and new immediacy” to tell a story about “who we were, who we are, and who we yet may be.”<sup>31</sup>

With its deliberate pacing, reverential use of period photographs, and liturgical narration, Burns’s sweeping, 11-hour retelling of the nation’s bloodiest and consequential conflict fits the mold of epic composition. Indeed, as Edgerton has observed, in *The Civil War* there is “a recurring assertion” that the conflict “gave birth to a newly redefined American nation.”<sup>32</sup> More specifically, Columbia University historian Barbara Fields remarked during her appearance in the first episode of the series, this new rebirth of the nation was not only about the struggle on the battlefield, but “about something higher – about humanity, about human dignity, about human freedom.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 1; Robert Brent Toplin, introduction to *Ken Burns’s The Civil War: Historians Respond*, ed. Robert Brent Toplin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), xiii.

<sup>31</sup> George F. Will, “A Masterpiece on the Civil War,” *Washington Post*, September 20, 1990, A23; Richard Zoglin, “The Terrible Remedy,” *Time*, September 24, 1990; Walter Goodman, “Our War the Way it Was,” *New York Times*, September 23, 1990, H33; Tom Shales, “The Civil War Drama,” *Washington Post*, September 23, 1990, G1.

<sup>32</sup> Edgerton, *Ken Burns’s America*, 8.

<sup>33</sup> *The Civil War*, episode 1, “The Cause (1861),” directed by Ken Burns, aired September 23, 1990.

### *The Vietnam War*

After completing work on *The Civil War*, Burns had decided that he no longer wanted to produce documentaries on war. The experience of spending so much time with martial themes, with death and tragedy, he explained, had been “hard, emotionally hard.”<sup>34</sup> Towards the end of the 1990s, however, Burns recalled coming across a set of statistics reporting that veterans of the Second World War had been passing away at the rate of 1000 per day. This devastating loss of what Burns called “tangible memory,” coupled with the troubling fact that – according to Burns at least – the nation was losing its “historical compass,” had convinced the filmmaker that it was the right time to delve again into the nation’s martial history. The result had been the seven-part, fourteen-hour series, *The War*, which he produced in collaboration with Lynn Novick and Sarah Botstein.<sup>35</sup>

While wrapping up work on *The War*, Burns and his team decided that producing a film on the Vietnam War was the next logical step. That war was, as Burns explained, “the most important event in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and still seems to inform our daily life.”<sup>36</sup> Over the next ten years, Burns, Novick, and Botstein researched the topic, consulting scholars, reading the relevant literature, and accumulating some 25,000 period photographs and some 1500 hours of archival video footage. In addition, they acquired the rights to more than 100 contemporary pop songs (including tracks from The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, and Bob Dylan). And then there were the on-camera interviews, which, under Novick and Botstein’s influence, ended up including

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<sup>34</sup> Burns quoted in Chuck Springston, “Ken Burns Interview: The Story Behind His Vietnam War Docu-series,” *Military Times*, September 16, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2SVVEyl>

<sup>35</sup> “About the Series,” PBS.com, September 2007, <https://to.pbs.org/2Sq9KCP>

<sup>36</sup> Burns quoted in Springston, “Ken Burns Interview.”

three trips to Vietnam to interview civilians, officials, and soldiers who fought for the South Vietnamese Army, the Viet Cong, and for the North Vietnamese regular Army.<sup>37</sup>

All told, the production cost some \$30 million. Funding was provided by sponsors as ideologically diverse as the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Bank of America, and conservative businessman and philanthropist David H. Koch. The strategy was deliberate, said Burns. “That’s a way of telling people ‘You can re-sheath your knives.’”<sup>38</sup> The desire to appear politically neutral, and to tell a story of the Vietnam war that had not been previously told lay behind Burns and Novick decision not to pursue interviews with well-known veterans and activists like John McCain and Daniel Ellsberg. “It seemed best to receive your information from the sincerity of new people. Neil Sheehan [identifier] was there, but we didn’t have ten Neil Sheehans and we didn’t interview Daniel Ellsberg for the same reason. We just felt these people who are alive, they have an interest in spinning their story in the best possible way.”<sup>39</sup>

Still, with a subject as recent and as raw as the Vietnam War, the Burns-Novick series was bound to attract criticism. Writing in the conservative *Washington Times*, for example, the retired Marine Lieutenant Colonel and political commentator Oliver North took a dim view on what he called Burns’s “endless fairy tales” about the war. A key participant in the Iran-Contra Affair during the Reagan administration and a former platoon leader in Vietnam, North accused Burns of reproducing a clichéd interpretation

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<sup>37</sup> See Jennifer Schuessler, “Ken Burns and Lynn Novick Tackle the Vietnam War,” CBS News, “Transcript: Ken Burns and Lynn Novick on ‘Face the Nation,’ Sept. 17, 2017,” <https://cbsn.ws/2uVQK5S>; Alyssa Rosenberg, “Unburying the Vietnam War,” *Washington Post*, September 18, 2017, <https://wapo.st/2Gb670C>.

<sup>38</sup> Burns quoted in Jennifer Schuessler, “Ken Burns and Lynn Novick Tackle the Vietnam War,” *New York Times*, September 1, 2017, <https://nyti.ms/2ws8Tbz>.

<sup>39</sup> Burns quoted in Mike Fleming, Jr., “Ken Burns & Lynn Novick On ‘The Vietnam War’ & The Eerie Parallels to Trump and Today’s Political Landscape,” *Deadline.com*, August 24, 2017.

of the war that focused excessively on the atrocities committed by American servicemembers who, at least in North's reading, had been maligned as "pot-smoking, drug-addicted, hippie marauders." Little was said, he wrote, "about the courage, patriotism, and dedication of the U.S. troops who fought honorably, bravely, and the despicable way in which we were 'welcomed' home." Particularly egregious was what North saw as Burns's partisan attacks on President Nixon, who was presented as "a cold-blooded, calculating politician more interested in re-election than the lives of U.S. troops in combat." It was Nixon, North urged his readers to remember, who had ended the war, the result of a complex strategy to achieve "peace with honor." "Richard Nixon kept his promises," North wrote. "Ken Burns did not."<sup>40</sup>

If some, like North, faulted *The Vietnam War* for being insufficiently deferential or patriotic in its interpretation, others took issue with its perpetuation of a conventional, pro-American narrative. Unpacking what he called the "insidious ideology" of the series, the *New Republic's* Alex Shephard described Burns and Novick's reconciliationist, "many sides" approach as inadequate to anything other than a "big, baggy historical truth that everyone can agree on." In characteristically Burnsian fashion, Shephard continued, the series seemed to want to celebrate consensus. However, it was precisely the Vietnam War that had "accelerated the fracturing of Burns's beloved monoculture."<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, for the journalist Nick Turse, author of an horrific study of the U.S. military's "free fire" policies in Vietnam, the film's overwhelming focus on the American experience of the war (despite the inclusion of Vietnamese nationals among the series' on-air interviews)

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<sup>40</sup> Oliver North, "A Faulty Retelling of 'The Vietnam War,'" *Washington Times*, October 16, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2IBbqkc>

<sup>41</sup> Alex Shephard, "The Insidious Ideology of Ken Burns's 'The Vietnam War,'" *The New Republic*, September 19, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2NsvZHA>

meant that there was little discussion of the war's devastating impact on Vietnamese civilians – much of which was deliberate U.S. military policy. In order to deny the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army sources of food, supply, and personnel, Turse reports, American commanders had systematically bombed and shelled large areas of the countryside in a way that was designed to drive people from their homes and depopulate entire regions. "Houses were set ablaze, whole villages were bulldozed, and people were forced into squalid refugee camps and filthy urban slums short of water, food, and shelter." Burns and Novick's film, Turse wrote, "only weakly gestures at this civilian toll and what it means."<sup>42</sup>

The apparent lack of substantive discussion of policy in *The Vietnam War* was also a common theme among historians' critiques of the series. In a review published in the *American Historical Review*, for instance, the historian of international affairs, Mark Philip Bradley, took Burns and Novick's film to task for omitting analysis of the structural causes for American intervention in southeast Asia, while at the same time focusing too much on individual agency. While he acknowledged that the appearance of American veterans and their families in the film succeeded in elaborating the more "quotidian dimensions" of the war in emotionally powerful ways, Bradley argued that the emphasis excluded potentially more critical (and perhaps uncomfortable) discussions about American empire in favor of bromides about "good faith," "decent people," "misunderstandings," and "miscalculations."<sup>43</sup> Likewise, several historians participating in a roundtable of essays in the academic journal *Diplomatic History* found *The Vietnam*

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<sup>42</sup> Nick Turse, "The Ken Burns Vietnam War Documentary Glosses Over Devastating Civilian Toll," *The Intercept*, September 28, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2ybCD06>

<sup>43</sup> Mark Philip Bradley, "Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's 'The Vietnam War,'" *American Historical Review* 124, no. 1 (February 2019): 164-169.



*War* to be woefully lacking in critical perspective. For Edwin Martini, the series “suffer[s] from a particular form of American exceptionalism,” which “results in the silencing of many perspectives that would complicate the story he is apparently trying to tell.” Added Robert Buzzanco, Burns and Novick’s conclusion that the war was a mistake, or “tragedy,” reiterated a “liberal response that has been *de rigueur* for decades now,” but which tended to reveal nostalgia for a lost innocence (“with a 1960s soundtrack to go with it”) instead of framing the war as a “waste of millions of lives brought on not by decent men, but by men of power and wealth who had little interest in democracy or freedom.”<sup>44</sup>

Like Burns’s Civil War epic, *The Vietnam War* approaches its subject matter in a relatively elevated style – by 2017, Burns’s reputation as a serious artist and documentarian had been well-established – and centers on a moment crucial to the later development (or, more accurately, fracturing) of national consciousness. For instance, in emphasizing emotions common to all Americans during the war years, the series narrator Peter Coyote stated in the premier episode that “for those Americans who fought in it, and for those who fought against it back home, as well as for those who merely glimpsed it on the nightly news, the Vietnam War was a decade of agony, the most divisive period since the Civil War.”<sup>45</sup> To the extent that the series celebrated the heroes of such a divisive conflict, they were those on all sides who suffered and those who died, and even those who took it as their patriotic duty to oppose what they felt to be an unjust war. And

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<sup>44</sup> Edwin A. Martini, “The Placebo Effect: Reflections on Ken Burns’s and Lynn Novick’s ‘The Vietnam War,’” *Diplomatic History* 42, no. 3 (June 2018): 401-405; Robert Buzzanco, “Don Draper Does Vietnam (a.k.a., Ken Burns Teaches the War in 10 Easy Lessons),” *Diplomatic History* 42, no. 3 (June 2018): 380-384.

<sup>45</sup> *The Vietnam War*, episode 1, “Déjà vu (1858-1961),” directed by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, aired September 17, 2017.

to the extent that *The Vietnam War* included an element of the sublime, it was perhaps the war's tragic ambiguity – the unanswerable question of “what happened” that had motivated Burns's and Novick's interest and echoed in the memories of many of the veterans that had been interviewed for the series.

In both series, moreover, Burns displays a Homeric tendency to recount lists of names, places, and figures. As Edgerton has noted, in *The Civil War*, such a moment occurs during the very first episode of the series, when the narrator and historian David McCullough states that,

*The Civil War was fought in 10,000 places, from Valverde, New Mexico, and Tullahoma, Tennessee, to St. Albans, Vermont, and Fernandina on the Florida coast. More than 3 million Americans fought in it, and over 600,000 men, 2 percent of the population died, in it ... In two days at Shiloh, on the banks of the Tennessee River, more Americans fell than in all previous American wars combined. At Cold Harbor, some 7,000 Americans fell in twenty minutes. Men who had never strayed twenty miles from their front doors now found themselves soldiers in great armies fighting epic battles hundreds of miles from home. They knew they were making history, and it was the greatest adventure of their lives.*<sup>46</sup>

Similarly, in the premier episode of *The Vietnam War*, narrator Peter Coyote encapsulates the war as follows:

*America's involvement in Vietnam began in secrecy. It ended, thirty years later, in failure, witnessed by the entire world. It was begun in good faith, by decent people, out of fateful misunderstandings, American overconfidence, and cold war miscalculation. And it was prolonged because it seemed easier to muddle through than to admit that it had been caused by tragic decisions, made by five American presidents, belonging to both political parties. Before the war was over, more than 58,000 Americans would be dead. At least 250,000 South Vietnamese troops died in the conflict as well. So did over a million North Vietnamese soldiers and Viet Cong guerrillas. Two million civilians, north and south, are thought to have*

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<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Edgerton, *Ken Burns's America*, 22-23. The original appears in *The Civil War*, episode 1, “The Cause (1861),” Directed by Ken Burns, aired September 23, 1990.

*perished, as well as tens of thousands more in the neighboring states of Laos and Cambodia.*<sup>47</sup>

Though Burns often claims that his films have never intended to be comprehensive accounts, such passages establish the series' attempts to encapsulate a greater totality, to be if not the "only version" of a selected historical topic depicted on film, then to be, for the present generation at least, an authoritative artistic expression.<sup>48</sup>

Both of Burns's films, however, differ in some key respects to classical definitions of the epic. As the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin observed in his canonical essay on the form, the epic constitutes a "closed" genre (as distinct from the "emerging" novel) in the sense that the national past it describes is separated from the present by an absolute and unbridgeable distance. As a consequence, while the epic may serve contemporary society as a myth of origins, Bakhtin writes, "there is no place in the epic world for any openendedness, indecision, [or] indeterminacy. There are no loopholes in it through which we might glimpse the future."<sup>49</sup> In contrast, Burns's objective as a popular historian is precisely to link past to present. "History, it seems, to me, is really not about the past; it's about the present. We define ourselves now by the subjects we choose from the past and the way each succeeding generation interprets those subjects. They are more a mirror of how we are now than they are a literal guide to what went before."<sup>50</sup> What Burns describes here, therefore, is not the "absolute" past of the epic as

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<sup>47</sup> *The Vietnam War*, episode 1, "Déjà Vu (1858-1961)," Directed by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, aired September 17, 2017. Full text of the quote appears in Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns, *The Vietnam War: An Intimate History*, xv-xvii.

<sup>48</sup> On the epic as a "totalizing" and "encyclopedic" narrative form, see Luke Arnott, "Epic and Genre: Beyond the Boundaries of Media," *Comparative Literature* 68, no. 4 (2016), 361.

<sup>49</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), 16.

<sup>50</sup> Thelen, "The Movie Maker as Historian: Conversations with Ken Burns," 1033.

Bakhtin understands it, one that is impenetrably walled off from the present moment, but a constantly evolving field of knowledge and traditions that is always at the service of the here-and-now.

Burns's attempts at using film to synthesize diverse interpretive perspectives are likewise in contrast with the conception of the epic as closed or inaccessible. The appearance of American alongside Vietnamese veterans in *The Vietnam War*, for example (though there are many more of the former than the latter), of student activists, Gold Star families, and career diplomats, all contribute to a multivocal interpretation of the war – a war in which there is “no single truth” – that accords more with the heterogeneity that Bakhtin associates with the modern novel than the hierarchical and univocal discourse he attributes to the epic.<sup>51</sup> For Burns, the idea is to include the top-down and bottom-up perspectives simultaneously. Indeed, as Edgerton has observed, Burns's approach to history can best be characterized as liberal-pluralist, in which “differences of ethnicity, race, class, and gender are kept in a comparatively stable and negotiated consensus within the body politic.”<sup>52</sup> In this sense, Burns's historical methodology can be seen as itself constituting a kind of political practice: a democratic representation of history in which a plurality of voices – including witnesses, documents, images, video footage – are synthesized into a coherent whole. This practice, in turn, is commensurate with the model of democratic citizenship which Burns sees as crucial to the health of the Republic, and with the “diversity and variety ... promised in its conception and unveiling.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel,” 11-17.

<sup>52</sup> Edgerton, *Ken Burns's America*, 16-17.

<sup>53</sup> Burns, “Four O’Clock in the Morning Courage,” 175.

As more recent scholars of the epic have pointed out, however, Bahktin's conception of the epic specifically refers to the long epic poems of the Greeks and, as a systematic theory of epic criticism, has little to say about the continued production of the form in other epochs, and in other media forms. In attempting to account for the continued relevance of the epic form by contemporary cultural producers, Luke Arnott (as seen in Chapter 2) has theorized that the epic constitutes a "disembedded" genre, which can be used to describe different kinds of cultural practices. That is to say, when disembedded from its traditional context as a long narrative poem, the "epic" can describe any kind of cultural production (prose, film, television, comic books, video games) that generally fits the following criteria: First, that the work is a "totalizing" narrative, meaning that it aspires to encapsulate a culture, and to be a definitive expression of its subject; Second, that it is composed in a relatively elevated style; Third, that it describes the concerns of a culture or community; and finally, that it draws upon a greater cultural body of symbolic or narrative material.<sup>54</sup>

Apart from expanding the purview of epic criticism to new cultural forms, Arnott's model has also extended the category so that it can include more complicated narratives like Burns's *The Vietnam War*, a series whose subject – and its producers' stated approach to that subject – might otherwise seem to resist the epic designation. As we have seen, for example, Ken Burns's personal imprimatur as a renowned documentarian – along with that of his production company, Florentine Films, and collaborations of co-director Lynn Novick and historian Geoffrey Ward – has guaranteed that the film series would be received as a serious cultural production. That many of

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<sup>54</sup> Arnott, "Epic and Genre," 361.

Burns's films, including *The Vietnam War*, are broadcast on public television and that they receive funds from the National Endowment for the Humanities and other philanthropic institutions are further markers of gravitas. Burns's consistent filmmaking style, meanwhile – including the famous “Ken Burns Effect” (which has for years been a feature on iMovie), and his seamless synthesis of photographs, video, and on-screen interviews – has set the standard for historical documentary film since *The Civil War*.

Because of its closeness in time, *The Vietnam War*, unlike many of Burns's other films, was able to make extensive use of archival television clips in order to convey to the viewer the authentic sense of emotional involvement that war coverage had carried into American living rooms on a daily basis. Indeed, to heighten this sense of vicarious experience of the “uncensored war,” much of the archival television clips were framed on-screen by the outline of a period television set, inviting modern-day viewers to project themselves into the past *as TV viewers*, and to imagine what it would have been like to see the violence of war, the reassurances of government officials, and the ongoing protests against the war unfold before them.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, when combined with other symbolic and historic material like period photographs, official films, print documentation, interviews, and period music, *The Vietnam War*, in spite of its producers' reluctance to offer definitive truths, presents a totalizing narrative of the conflict. “A film conveys certainties, notwithstanding its makers efforts to purge them” one historian wrote after viewing the film, and it is in the subtle acts of selection, framing, scoring, and editing in which the act of interpretation proceeds.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Daniel C. Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>56</sup> Nick Cullather, “Vietnam and its Television Histories,” *Diplomatic History* 42, no. 3 (June, 2018): 377-379.

Indeed, it is precisely in the act of finding commonalities within the “Rashomon of equally plausible ‘stories’” that an overarching – though not “absolutist” – narrative framework begins to emerge.<sup>57</sup> Its contours can be glimpsed in narrator Peter Coyote’s closing lines of the series: “The Vietnam War,” he averred, “was a tragedy, immeasurable and irredeemable. But meaning can be found in the individual stories of those who lived through it – stories of courage and comradeship and perseverance, of understanding and forgiveness, and ultimately reconciliation.”<sup>58</sup> As in much of Burns’s work, it is this spirit of reconciliation, of consensus, that serves as the narrative fulcrum for organizing diverse and seemingly contradictory experiences into a meaningful unity.

### *Conclusion*

In imposing logical order on a seemingly chaotic past, Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, like all historians, have made a series of decisions about what persons or issues or events to include and which to omit; which to emphasize and which to gloss over. In choosing an epic narrative mode for his 1990 series *The Civil War*, Burns, as Edgerton writes, Burns chose a model that is “heroic in scope,” and which “tends to celebrate a people’s national history in sweeping terms.”<sup>59</sup> Whether the subject matter is biographical, as in *The Roosevelts*, or narrative, as in *The War*, much of Burns’s subsequent work has similarly dealt with themes of patriotism and national consensus – more interested in the *unum*, that is, than the *pluribus*.

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<sup>57</sup> Burns and Novick, “Introduction,” xi.

<sup>58</sup> *The Vietnam War*, episode 10, “The Weight of Memory (March 1973 – Onward),” Directed by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, aired September 28, 2017.

<sup>59</sup> Edgerton, *Ken Burns’s America*, 8.

*The Vietnam War*, both the series of films and the subject matter, however, reveals some of the limitations of this approach. As several reviewers have observed, to the extent that Burns and Novick's have sought to be inclusive, to "contain and faithfully reflect" a "Rashomon of equally plausible 'stories,'" as they say in their introduction to the companion volume, they have largely left out critical interpretations of the war coming from professional historians and political activists. One might imagine how including voices like those of Daniel Ellsberg, Noam Chomsky, Todd Gitlin (a leading member of the Students for a Democratic Society) – and even neoconservative writers Max Boot and Lewis Sorley (who have variously argued that the war might have been won<sup>60</sup>), might have altered the tone of the series.

Taken together, such voices may have contributed to a more fractured picture of the war, precluding the emergence of a consensus narrative – and perhaps have attracted more partisan criticism of the series into the bargain. Still, the presentation of such widely contrasting, even irreconcilable viewpoints may have better addressed the ongoing divisions in American society that Burns and Novick seemed to be keen on addressing and fostered more compelling conversations about the nature and use of American military power abroad.

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<sup>60</sup> See Max Boot, *The Road Not Taken: Edward Landsdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam* (New York: Liveright, 2018); Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999).



## Conclusion

In her 1978 autobiographical essay, *The White Album*, Joan Didion famously observed that “we tell ourselves stories in order to live.” Confronted with both the mundane and bizarre of daily life, we make sense of our experiences through narration, imposing a logical and moral order on what might otherwise be a bewildering “phantasmagoria” of events. Through such narrative processing, Didion explains, we “freeze” the “disparate images” of our lived reality according to an overarching set of “ideas” that might best explain that reality and give it meaning. “We interpret what we see,” she writes, and “select the most workable of the multiple options.”<sup>1</sup>

In *Small Screen Histories*, I have been concerned with similar questions of interpretation. It has been my goal to examine how the producers of television documentaries and docudramas have narrativized historical experience, and in so doing, have imposed a certain logical and moral order on the past. On a purely technical level, this process has involved organizing the past according to the temporal and aesthetic conventions of the medium (or, in the case of *Roots*, *The Civil War*, and *The Vietnam War*, condensing the usual weekly broadcast schedule in order to create the sense that these programs are significant television “events”). Each of the programs I’ve discussed has told its story of the past episodically, either as an anthology of self-contained stories (as in *You Are There*), or as parts of a longer narrative arc (as in *Crusade in Europe*). Each also adhered to the dictates of intimacy and immediacy in their presentations, emphasizing the kind of tight shots and personal drama that has traditionally defined the

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Didion, “The White Album,” in *The White Album*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 11.

television aesthetic. This personalization of the past, meanwhile – whether it centers on the actions of generals and G.I.s, judges and accused, masters and slaves – suggests its own particular way of understanding the past, one in which the story of the individual experience is usually taken to be indicative, or representative of broader currents at work in contemporary society.

As Horace Newcomb has observed, television's historical aesthetic likewise involves the transposing of contemporary concerns onto the past as a means of examining and clarifying them.<sup>2</sup> In each of the series I've discussed in this study – *Crusade in Europe*, *You Are There*, *Roots*, *The Civil War*, and *The Vietnam War* – this process primarily revolves around shifting concepts of American national identity that would have resonated with network television's broad constituency. For the editors of *Crusade in Europe*, this meant emphasizing Eisenhower's admonishments that peace and prosperity for the free world might be achieved if Americans could retain the spirit, readiness, and resolve with which they defeated the Axis; for Charles Russell, Sidney Lumet, and the various writers of *You Are There* (both blacklisted and non-blacklisted), it meant mining American and Western tradition for pivotal moments that allegorized the conflict between the individual and society and which led to moral lessons about democracy, dissent, and the preservation of human freedoms; in *Roots*, it was the expansion of the American historical tradition to include the experiences of African Americans, and more broadly, of the importance of the family unit in American society; and for Ken Burns, it was the spirit of reconciliation after moments of intense crisis and national trauma. In each of these cases, the prevailing concept of national identity shifts

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<sup>2</sup> Horace Newcomb, *TV: The Most Popular Art* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1974), 256-264.

from one paradigm to another in the course of the drama, and it is from this transition that the enduring values and traditions of the nation emerge.

From this perspective, televisual representation of such disparate events as World War II, the Salem Witch Trials, the Vietnam War, or the experience of American slavery are less significant for the verisimilitude of their historical reconstructions than for how such verisimilitude – factual accuracy, but also the relationships between characters, and the various conflicts that emerge between them – relates to broader structures of meaning by which the past is made intelligible and “realistic” to viewers. Much as the late Hayden White observed with respect to formal historiography, for the producers of history television, the process of narrativizing the past extends beyond the aggregation of facts. It also requires the organizing of facts according to a recognizable plot structure, whose completeness (in the sense that it has a beginning, middle, and end) implicitly requires the historian to moralize – to make a claim about the meaning of the story. Like the structuring functions of Didion’s “ideas,” the complete narrative, White argues, is always focused on a “fixed reference point” – a concept of national identity, of progress, freedom, multiculturalism, or some other ideal or cultural value – “by which the flow of ephemeral events can be endowed with specifically moral meaning.”<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the meaning of the past for White is not “found” in history but is constructed by the historian. Describing the process of editing archival footage during the production of *Crusade in Europe*, for instance, a *Time* magazine radio and television columnist explained that “the amount of good footage available to illustrate each military operation has necessarily determined the shape of the film; in turn, the film has often

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<sup>3</sup> Hayden White, “Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” in *The Content of the Form*, (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 22.

gained in comprehensibility by giving shape to the shapelessness of war.” On its own, the available collection of archival footage was too vast and varied to add up to a coherent narrative of the Second World War. Using Eisenhower’s conception of World War II as a “crusade” mounted by the free peoples of the world against the manifest evil of the Axis powers, however, March of Time editors were able to construct a detailed and realistic story of the war that had a specific moral meaning concerning the need for Americans in the future to remain in a state of readiness and engage in multilateral cooperation. “The hard unity and rounded drama,” the reviewer continued, “preserves a sense of direction, and imposes a feeling of historic logic.”<sup>4</sup> This logic is not intrinsic in the history of the war itself, or even in its filmic documentation, but in its conscious alignment with the plot structure of Eisenhower’s book.

While the tendency to moralize or to connect the past with the present is studiously avoided by most professional historians in the interest of analytic objectivity, such techniques are, as Gary Edgerton writes, “tacitly embraced” by the producers of history television as a way of creating meaningful, usable pasts for their audiences.<sup>5</sup> As we have seen, each of the series examined in this study was addressed to contemporary concerns: to the uncertainty of the postwar global order and the emerging cold war with the Soviet Union; to the domestic terrors of the House Un-American Activities Committee and McCarthyism; to the civil rights and black power movements of the 1960s and 1970s; and to the steady fracturing of the American polity at the end of the twentieth century and the dawn of the twenty-first. In each of these contexts, the meaning

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<sup>4</sup> “New Picture,” *Time*, May 9, 1949, 66.

<sup>5</sup> Gary Edgerton, “Television as Historian: A Different Kind of History Altogether,” in *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age*, ed. Gary R. Edgerton and Peter C. Rollins (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 3.

of the past was posited as a moral for the present, an allegorical guide to reckoning with the challenges confronting the contemporary nation-state in categories ranging from foreign policy, to domestic politics, to cultural inclusivity.

While television docuseries that connect past and the present may well be instructive and help contribute to a wider appreciation of national history (though there are few academic studies that directly address this question), the consensus paradigm that typically dominates in these programs has often excluded more critical or uncomfortable perspectives. As we have seen with Ken Burns's treatment of the Vietnam War, for instance, the desire to produce a reconciliationist narrative led the filmmaker to focus on the individual agency of combatants, protestors, and their families rather than to engage with structural causes. The result, as several critics pointed out, elided discussion of American imperialism as a causal factor in U.S. military involvement in southeast Asia – a discussion that may have attracted sharp criticism from some quarters but may have generated more important discussions about the projection of American military power in the Middle East and elsewhere around the globe. Seventy years earlier, emerging cold war sensibilities, coupled with the idea among corporate and political elites that television should be used as a technology for fostering good citizenship, likely precluded the possibility of any but a patriotic narrative of World War II that emphasized national unity above all else. Events like the firebombing of Dresden, the calamity at Hürtgen Forest, the internment of Japanese American civilians, or the experiences of black soldiers in a segregated Army, were conveniently omitted.

The specific danger of such omissions, I would argue, stems from their repetition across time (in the form of re-runs), and across multiple texts. "People are now born into

the symbolic environment of television and live with its repetitive lessons throughout life,” communication scholar George Gerbner and his colleagues once wrote. The consequence, they continued, was that “television cultivates from the outset the very predispositions that affect future cultural selections and uses.”<sup>6</sup> *Crusade in Europe*, for example, was the first of many American television documentary series to plot the war as a heroic endeavor with tragic and romantic elements: A sequel, *Crusade in the Pacific* was broadcast in 1951; NBC’s *Victory at Sea*, which was pitched to network executives as a series of films similar in style to the earlier Eisenhower series, was broadcast in 1951 and 1952 to great acclaim and was continually rebroadcast in full or in part for decades<sup>7</sup>; and subsequent documentary and docudrama series like *The Winds of War* (1983), *Band of Brothers* (2001), and Ken Burns’s *The War* (2007) – among others – cast the war in a familiar pattern. And so, once a historical event becomes traditionally associated with a certain type of story – an epic, tragedy, or romance, for example – and a certain “complex of symbols,” to use White’s phrasing, it may be difficult to challenge that association in popular memory.<sup>8</sup>

But as the multichannel, multiplatform horizons of American television have expanded over the last decade, it may be more difficult than ever for filmmakers to produce historical series that have as wide an impact on national historical consciousness as did David Wolper’s *Roots* in 1977, or Ken Burns’s *The Civil War* in 1990. What the

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<sup>6</sup> George Gerbner (et. al.), “Charting the Mainstream: Television’s Contributions to Political Orientations,” in *American Media and Mass Culture: Left Perspectives*, ed. Donald Lazere (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987), 442.

<sup>7</sup> See Peter C. Rollins, “Victory at Sea: Cold War Epic,” in *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age*, ed. Gary R. Edgerton and Peter C. Rollins (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 103-104.

<sup>8</sup> See Hayden White, “Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 88.

historian Richard Evans once called the “history boom” in popular culture has now extended to multiple cable channels as well as streaming videos and podcasts that represent a variety of perspectives on the past – including those of academics as well as serious amateurs, journalists, students, comedians, and conspiracy theorists.<sup>9</sup> As the media ecosystem continues to expand and subdivide, and as content producers continue to turn to the past as a vast reserve of ready-made narrative possibilities, it will continue to be important for critical scholarship to identify how present and past are made to converge within media texts, and how history and memory are made to align with, or contradict prevailing power structures.

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<sup>9</sup> Richard J. Evans, “Prologue: ‘What is History?’ – Now,” in *What is History Now?*, ed. David Cannadine (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 12.

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