

BLIND SPOT ON “THE WAR”
(A response to Mr. Robert Bianco of USA Today)

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All of us who have owned a car know that it takes a little time to get used to the blind spots in the structure. Those spots are not our fault. They come with the design of the car and we would be foolish if we choose to ignore those spots when we change lanes or go in reverse. But we would be especially dumb if someone with a similar car forewarns us and we choose to ignore them.

One would think that by now in the year 2007, all Americans would be aware of the inherited and built-in blind spots in our culture, especially in that vehicle of cultural transmission we call “American History”. That history continues to be written, discovered and reconsidered not because of what has been included as much as for what it often has not. And that history often does not include a warning about its blind spots.

And so it happens that when one chooses to ignore those blind spots one runs into trouble. Consider the actual imbroglio regarding the documentary series “The War” on PBS, by celebrated documentary maker Ken Burns. Mr. Burns’ excellent reputation precedes him so “everyone” has eagerly anticipated this documentary on WWII. But there is one exception. “Hispanic” or “Latino” veterans of WWII and their supporters spotted a blind spot – the documentary made no mention of the contribution of this American portion of the population to the war effort (contributions by Native Americans and women were also noted omitted though these complaints were less publicized).

The producers claimed to be “dismayed and saddened by any assumption that we intentionally excluded anyone from our series...It doesn't focus on any particular group.” But this is precisely the “blind spot”. By excluding a significant group one does indeed focus on the only group included; especially when as many a half a million Hispanics fought in WWII, and when eleven Mexican-Americans and two Puerto Ricans earned Medals of Honor. Not to mention the fact that the commanding general of the IX Tactical Air Command responsible for the successful coordination of air-to-ground forces during and after D-Day was Maj. Gen. Elwood R. “Pete” Quesada, a Hispanic. Or that a General responsible for the US Marines landings in Guadalcanal and Okinawa was also a Hispanic, Lt. Gen. Pedro A. Del Valle, from Puerto Rico.

Granted, Mr. Burns, like anybody else, can freely choose what story or stories to tell. And so he chose as point of departure for his chronicle the story and the impact the war had on four American towns, according to a spokesman, “to show the universal human experience of war by focusing on the testimonies of just a handful of people”. How is that universal, who knows? The attempt “focuses on the effect of the war on them, their families and their communities.” But if the attempt is to be universal, were there no families and crying mothers left behind in San Juan, Los Angeles, San Antonio?

We believe that Mr. Burns did not intentionally and of ill-will decide to exclude this group. Most of our history doesn't intentionally exclude sides of American history, nevertheless, it does. So we are not surprised by this blind spot. Although it has been noted that his other acclaimed documentaries “The Civil War” (1990), “Baseball” (1994), and “Jazz” (2001) have also suffered from the same blind spot. In “Baseball” and “Jazz”, documentaries of similar length of about 14 hours, Hispanic contributions comprised six minutes and three minutes, respectively.

Yet we are surprised at the reaction coming from some quarters. Susan Estrich, for example, is correct to say that “members of Congress should keep their hands off the content of programming,” but then she says, “particularly in the case of PBS, which depends on the government for financial support.” Well no, Prof. Estrich, it depends on tax-payers, they are the government! And as long as Mr. Burns benefits from that system the tax-payers have something to say.

After citing a list of issues Ms. Estrich said “Hispanic Americans have real issues to worry about in America today, Ken Burns is the least of their problems.” Well, thanks for your concern but one, if not the main issue, that has affected us is exclusion from history. Ironically, "The War" makes its PBS debut in the midst of Hispanic Heritage Month.

The last minute inclusion of Hispanic veterans by Mr. Burns should not be seen, as Mr. Bianco of USA Today claims, as bowing to pressure “that broadens the film's reach while violating its spirit” but as a fair representation of the American spirit. For as he also claims “There are no voices other than Americans”, well yes, this too “is our War”; a documentary of World War II could not be complete without the contribution of a large part of its population.

We agree with Mr. Bianco in that, “This is a controversy imposed by the present on the past, a product of an America so determined to view itself as a collection of competing interest groups, it apparently can't even remember what it was like to see itself as one nation.” The problem, Mr. Bianco, is that history is not just about the past but for whose present it is written. And more often than not Hispanics have been excluded from that history.

However, this should not be about “political correctness” but about American correctness. It should be an effort to eliminate the sense of alienation future generations of young Hispanics would feel from the nation that once saw itself as one. It should be an effort not to deny *all* American children of a complete view of their history. If *The War* “will serve as a reminder” of that unity it will be a great accomplishment. But it will only do so by fair inclusion. How else are we going to continue driving down this road often called “the American Experiment”, for which all kinds of Americans died during its greatest epic, if we ignore our blind spots?

As of closing of this edition, this op/ed sent to the Grand Rapids Press and major papers in the country in various versions has been declined— including USA Today. Had it not been for the intervention from several veterans' organizations, future generations of American children watching the Ken Burns documentary wouldn't know that during America's greatest war, Americans of Hispanic descent played any role during that epic and defining event. If Mr. Burns had decided to make a documentary titled “How WWII Affected Some American Families in Four Small American Towns” there would have been no problem. But you cannot make a documentary titled “The War” about WWII, supported by taxpayers, and expect not to include the contributions of all Americans regardless of sex, creed, race or family background. The two U.S. Marines of Hispanic heritage which appear in the documentary, Bill Lansford and Pete Arias, appear courtesy of another film maker whose footage Mr. Burn only reluctantly decided to include.