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David Thelen


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Interviews by David Thelen

The following document combines transcriptions of two telephone conversations in which Ken Burns spoke from his New Hampshire office and David Thelen from a Bloomington, Indiana, radio studio, which taped both conversations. Thelen sent a transcription of the June 17, 1994, conversation to Burns with some follow-up questions; Burns responded to the questions in a second phone call, on July 20, 1994, and returned the original transcript with extensive changes. The two records were combined to form the present document, which was accepted by Burns with only minor alterations.

Conversations

DAVID THELEN: How did you get interested in connecting film and history?

KEN BURNS: Purely by accident. I had been committed since as early as junior high school to being a filmmaker, and I thought that meant being a dramatic filmmaker. All my life, though, completely independent of this cinematic interest, there was a passionate devotion to nonfiction and, more than that, to American history. I'm completely untrained and untutored in history, but when my friends were reading novels, I was reading encyclopedias and histories and almanacs. Eventually, in 1971, I went to Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, and ran into social documentary photographers who convinced me that what went on in the real world was much more dramatic than anything of the imagination and convinced me to become a documentary filmmaker. About the same time I had an opportunity to exercise an interest in American history when I was asked to make a film on Old Sturbridge Village, which is the New England equivalent of Colonial Williamsburg. And the rest literally is history. Doing that film for Sturbridge, all the bells went off; it became a passion for me, so I probably will skew your study because of the high degree of emotionalism that's involved in my work.

DT: Do you relate to history as a whole, or are there particular pieces that interest you?

Ken Burns has been a documentary filmmaker for fifteen years. He is director, producer, co-researcher, co-writer, chief cinematographer, music director, and executive producer for several productions; the best known are "The Civil War" and "Baseball."
KB: I'm interested in American history, and that seems to be it. I took only one formal history course in college, and that was in Russian history; I enjoyed it tremendously, but I am particularly interested in the very powerful emotional resonances that seem to emanate from the collision of individuals and events and moments in American history. That is what my life's work has been about: trying to lasso these feelings and trying to translate them for a large popular audience. I hope that in the process we can begin to rescue history from the academy, which has done a terrific job in the last hundred years of murdering our history.

DE: I think we'd better talk about that. What do you have in mind?

KB: I think that the adoption of the Germanic academic model at the end of the nineteenth century really spelled the end of popular history. The word history itself, made up primarily of the word "story," gives an indication of what it should be about; and we've always, as a species, been interested in history as a broad popular form. Think of Homer, singing the epic verses of his people—verses that included not only the gods in the pantheon but the ordinary foot soldiers. But somewhere along the line our his-story has been murdered by an academic academy dedicated to communicating only with itself and unconcerned not only with how one wrote, that is to say, the art of writing history, but also with who was listening. As a result many of our most important historians helped kill the general public's appetite for history. That, plus our television culture, the very thing that I do, has gone a long way toward killing our historical curiosity.

DE: This history that is self-referential or, I think you said, talking to themselves . . .

KB: It's less that it's self-referential than that it's just so maddeningly abstruse and so stultifyingly specific that it has a hard time speaking to anyone but other like-minded historians; it falls prey to the worst kind of academic competition, the worst kind of academic show, and it forgets that ultimately history needs to be brought up and out to people. People without a past are not a people. I think we have conspired with our mind-numbing television and with a sort of insensitivity on the part of the teachers of history who render it boring to make most people think history is useless. But my belief is that history—our story—is the great pageant of everything that has come before this moment and that there could be nothing more important than an awareness of what went before us, because without that awareness we have no sense of where we've been in order to know where we're going.

DE: In your own work, do you find anything in academic history useful?

KB: Certainly. During the last two decades of making amateur history, I have known many academic historians and have come to depend on their expertise to help guide me through many projects. It has been my great good fortune to know many of the people who are the extraordinary exceptions to this frustrating history making I've just described. These are men and women in the academy who have spent a lifetime not only making good history but also trying to write well, not only
to themselves and to their colleagues but also to a broad popular audience, and who are also interested in how a people receive and regenerate their own history. 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.

DT: As you read or talk with one or more of these historians, can you give me an example or two of academic historians or their books that you admire? What do they contribute?

KB: In each of my productions I have been required by the National Endowment for the Humanities to assemble a distinguished panel of advisers who have been involved at every stage of the production, and I have been delighted to do so. "The Civil War" was probably the most telling example, because we engaged the services of so many different kinds of historians, but throughout my twenty years of historical filmmaking, I've enjoyed working very closely with William Leuchtenburg, a past president of the Organization of American Historians and one of our country's greatest academic scholars. I admire his work terrifically and his understanding and willingness to participate in our process has, I think, improved my films immeasurably. Most notably I had a great collaboration with him and with Alan Brinkley on a documentary I made on the life of the turbulent southern demagogue Huey Long. Both men were actually able to influence the production directly by showing a willingness not merely to submit to our process of filmmaking but to engage in it and to yield to those areas of poetic license and to the stylistic requirements of film, which I think improved our film.

DT: What exactly did they do? or what did you ask them to do?

KB: In all the films, the range of services begins with a critique of an initial idea, sort of an open discussion of some of our structural decisions and how they may or may not be successful. The next stage that the consultants are involved in is reviewing a proposal, usually a proposal prepared for the National Endowment for the Humanities, and critiquing that, demanding more rigorous intellectual organization to our thoughts and our thinking. The next stage would be usually at an early rough assembly of the footage. Then at a rough cut. Then at a fine cut. At all these stages, they might be sending in first-person documentary material, they might be criticizing an emphasis that has emerged or criticizing the lack of emphasis on a particular subject and generally improving the film.

For an example of how this works: we assembled a distinguished board of advisers for "The Civil War" and held many consultant meetings, which were often quite volatile and contentious affairs. For our first meeting in November 1986, the first draft of our script had been sent out a few weeks before to nearly two dozen distinguished historians. We had deliberately included on our board of advisers historians who ranged from what you would call very conservative, traditional historians of the Confederacy all the way to Marxist historians who felt that any treatment of anything
but emancipation was moribund "old" history, utterly discredited. You can imagine
the battles that would happen there. They felt the script was telling the story in
an old-fashioned, nineteenth-century way, so in their mind we had completely
missed the point. This was completely unfair. During the course of the first meeting,
several of the left-leaning historians criticized us severely for not including much
information in this first draft of a script, a draft that had been advertised as being
a working document in which we were inviting their comments. For several hours
they argued quite spitefully and belligerently, as if this was what we were going to
turn out, as if we didn't want to listen to anyone else's point of view. We patiently
explained not only that we were corrigible but that this script would undergo per-
haps twenty revisions, and many of these revisions would include their comments
and their criticism, and we welcomed what they were saying. We just didn't like the
way it was being presented.

Finally C. Vann Woodward, who had been quiet through much of this rather em-
barrassing exchange, looked at me and riveted the attention of everyone by saying,
"Ken. We pedants hope that we don't get in the way of your telling your story
magnificently. What is it that we can do to help you tell this story better?" And
because of many of those historians who had been arguing with us rather blandly
were his students, they stopped, and from that moment on we had really remarkable
cooperation. (At our next break I went out and brevetted C. Vann Woodward a
major general in the field. To this day Vann calls me General Burns and I call him
General Woodward for this help.) In fact we included nearly every one of the sugges-
tions that those historians made.

As filmmakers, we were able to listen and to hear—and to distinguish many
points of view. As a result, we were able to keep a perspective that included southern
points of view as well as bringing into play many new views of emancipation and
the many social changes that were overtaking our country, which were of primary
concern to our most vocal consultants. That was exciting to us, although some of
the historians were quite often more anxious that our film appear to represent only
and exactly what they personally felt it should be and not the vision of the artist.
We were hoping to tell a broad story, an American family portrait, and we didn't
need our history to subscribe to any particular polemic—so I thought we were able
to pick and choose scenes and moments and emphases from all these historians—
from all stripes—and to include them in the film without being all things to all
people. Despite the input, "The Civil War" is still a broadly personal work.

DT: That's an interesting part here. Do you see yourself as kind of a referee?

KB: No. I'm a filmmaker, and I, like a painter who chooses oil over watercolors, have
chosen to express myself in the documentary format; specifically, the way one
painter might favor certain particular earth tones in the oil paints that he chooses,
I have chosen to work with American history. That does not mean that I am lazy
about how I attend to history, but it just means that I am primarily an artist. I am
critically aware of the great tension in the making of history between art and science.
The absurdity of both is evident particularly in Civil War "studies." The science of
history would have you find in the reading of the telephone book the truest, most authentic sense of a people. There can be nothing more boring than that. The art of history, on the other hand, has produced Gone with the Wind, "North and South," and various treacly nostalgic Civil War epics that would convince you that it wasn't brother against brother but heaving bosom against heaving bosom.

DT: So you have historians, either in person or in books, giving you a variety of perspectives . . .

KB: Yes, that's correct, a variety of perspectives.

DT: And then you have documents; in the case of Civil War, quite a lot of them—

KB: And newspaper accounts, diaries, journals, love letters, military dispatches. We have the old photographs that provide certain evidential qualities. All of these things are what go into the mix.

DT: You have essentially exactly the same problem as any other historian.

KB: Absolutely. First and foremost, know that I am a narrative historian or narrative amateur historian—that is to say, I'm interested in telling stories, anecdotes. I'm interested in people, biography; and I know that these interests and tendencies are the structural building blocks of whatever I'm doing. Early on, I agreed to be influenced by the various historians whose services we engaged. For "The Civil War," we sought out the widest range of expertise. I agreed to be influenced by all, and then I began, essentially with my heart, to feel my way to a kind of truth for myself of how this material should be structured and presented. With the Civil War, it seemed to me that I could divide that war into its five years, '61 through '65, with the militarily less eventful years of '61 and '65 treating causes and effects. I eventually subdivided '62, '63, '64, and '65 into the first and second halves of the years, creating a total of nine episodes. For the baseball series, I decided to divide the history of the game into nine episodes, each one of which we called an inning, each inning detailing an era in the game, and in both cases—"The Civil War" and "Baseball"—to tell a straight chronological story. I engaged a great historian, Geoffrey C. Ward, to write the script, a script that undergoes ten or fifteen radical transformations in the course of editing, as material comes out and goes in. We find our ability to tell the story better in one section, harder in another, and the material almost instantly begins to speak to us and tells us what it needs.

DT: So you have that framework first.

KB: Yes, but it's not as simple as I've just described it to you—rudimentary decisions quite often get altered as you progress. We might put the Battle of Fredericksburg at the beginning of our fourth episode, even though it belongs chronologically at the end of our third, because the end of our third already had a climax—the Emancipation Proclamation—and so it's a bit of an anticlimax to put yet another important moment at the end of that episode. That is the kind of artistic, often Aristotelian, exigencies that influence structure. In another case we may treat the
interrelationship between the Battle of Vicksburg and the Battle of Gettysburg strictly chronologically, which is what few historians have done. We think that doing so solved many of the problems and confusions and misinterpretation of the influence of each one of those battles on the other, or I should say each one of those campaigns on the other.

DT: The actual letters and pictures that you get, for example, on the Civil War—do the historians collect those things?

KB: Not always. I would say on the Civil War probably 10 percent of the first-person material came from our consultants. The rest came from our own research and writing efforts. But the most significant of all the first-person quotes in "The Civil War," the Sullivan Ballou letter, was sent to us by Don Fehrenbach, and it was like a neutron bomb.

DT: I can see that. Do you have a staff of people who do the research?

KB: No. In fact the research is done by a very small group of people, including myself and usually one or two other coproducers and the writer, who has been, in every instance that you and I have discussed, Geoffrey C. Ward. It is my firm belief that research should be left not to the lowest paid, but to the highest paid—that is to say, those people most responsible for the finished project. I do not want someone else going into an archive of still photographs and making a preliminary decision about which photographs are good and which are not. Those are decisions I wish to make as a cinematographer, as the producer, and as the director of my films. I work with the same production people over and over again because I have to rely on their judgment to make the decisions about which first-person quotes we might consider using in our production.

DT: Who collects sources? Who reads them? Who advises on where to look? For instance, in the case of Civil War diaries or letters, would you actually be going through the archives?

KB: Yes. Quite often. I know I did that at Louisiana State University for days, reading various diaries. We rely on people pointing us in the direction of good diaries, but I’ll be the one that will finally edit out the quote, along with Geoff Ward.

DT: Is it only after you have imagined the year-by-year organization of the film, with a climax and so on, that you turn to the diaries?

KB: No, the diaries are there from the beginning. We’re finding them. Our advisers are finding them, or sharing them. We’re collecting all these materials.

DT: Then what?

KB: For us the left hand doesn’t know what the right hand is doing—intentionally. On the one hand, we’re filming material that we’re drawn to purely visually; on the other, we’re working on scenes in the script that we have perhaps no images to illustrate. By so doing we eschew illustration in favor of the more difficult task of finding
new and better ways to forge a relationship between word and image. The editing begins after three or four drafts of the script, and usually at that point the script is growing bigger, not being cut down, so that it includes everything we think it might contain; then of course the editing cuts that nearly 50 percent.

At the same time, we're learning with our visual material how to tell these stories, but you must understand there is very little preplanning here; you don’t go to a Shelby Foote or to an old Negro Leaguer knowing that he's going to fit a specific place in the script. You just go and talk to them about a broad range of subjects, and then the happy accidents of our editing are the way they in fact do dovetail into particular places; if they don't, that might necessitate minor rewriting of the script or it might dictate that an entire scene is removed or a new one written. The first draft of our “Baseball” series, for example, had a great deal of setup for the Black Sox scandal and a great deal of the aftermath of that scandal, but it had three or four lines pertaining to the actual World Series itself. We then found some footage, we came across some interesting stories, and we ended up writing—in the editing room—another five or six pages detailing precisely what was occurring in each of the games. We essentially quadrupled the length of the original scene by opening it up, as we call it, opening up the moment.

DT: Is that the same concept that operated in your remarkable use of individual stories in “The Civil War”?

KB: That’s exactly right. As you begin editing, you begin to see the incredible difficulty of creating this complex tapestry of interwoven stories. We start identifying scenes that are what we call narratively critical, that is to say, their placement cannot be really altered in our chronological presentation. Then you have other, more emotional chapters, for example, a scene on camp life, that has an ability to float between episodes. You could put it before Gettysburg, after Gettysburg, you could even move it to the next episode. It has an ability to float. And then you have other elements that we call telegrams, short bursts that also have a certain potential to move but are more or less tied to a specific moment and a specific time. It might be a letter home from a runaway slave or the drug confession of the nineteenth-century catcher named Tom Barlow. It is just sort of there, and it exists only for its moment. Or it might be that Lincoln attended the theater and saw William Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar, the great irony being that this remarkable play was performed by the three Booths, and there is a line in the play about an assassination:

How many ages hence
Shall this our lofty scene be acted o'er,
In states unborn, and accents yet unknown!

It takes all of fifteen seconds to communicate, and it has a kind of incendiary effect dramatically. Those are our telegrams. Our emotional sections like camp life begin to move during editing; some are eliminated. Our major thematic blocks, like the Battle of Fredericksburg, can only go after the Battle of Antietam and before Chancellorsville. You begin to anchor the program with that.
DT: So you use these individual stories—I'm trying to understand this—as illustrations? as what?

KB: They begin to be color, they begin to become detail, they begin to flesh out, they begin to actually, in an Aristotelian sense, help to determine the dramatic ebb and flow of any particular episode. Then, in the larger picture, they affect the broad canvas of the entire series.

DT: At what point would you want these scholars, the consultants, to critique? I guess you are saying at all points.

KB: Yes. Basically at all points. There is an alchemy to film production; you begin to see that some consultants are better at an earlier juncture, when you are dealing with a script. They may not have the sort of skills you want to have later on in the editing room. So we will often tailor who comes based on what we've seen in the early discussions. You might find someone who is belligerent or polemical and interested only in advancing their own particular point of view, and we necessarily wish to embrace and include a broad range of perspectives and believe our films can contain that. Quite often we will see a particular, almost personal, aspect to a consultant and have them advise us only in the areas in which we think they can be helpful. Conversely, many of these historians get excited about the possibility of our process. I know Bill Leuchtenburg and Alan Brinkley have actually become quite expert at the processes of what we do and understand the peculiar exigencies of honorable film production. For example, for "Baseball," Leuchtenburg has no official academic expertise; but I didn't want to have my film go out without him taking a look at it, so he marched up to New Hampshire and spent five days with us poring over every frame of our footage.

DT: Is that a typical amount of time a consultant might be involved?

KB: When we have screenings, yes. In the case of "The Civil War" and "Baseball," which are both nine-episode affairs, we invite our consultants usually for four and a half days, so that each half day is taken up with a single episode and its emerging themes.

DT: I just thought our readers might be interested in exactly how that might work.

KB: Sure. The last consultant screening that we had took place at the end of October 1993; it was the fine-cut screening of our baseball series. When we first screened it for our consultants, it was twenty-two hours. Over the next six months, we finished polishing it and making the corrections that they suggested and our own, and it had gone down to eighteen and a half hours. But at that fine-cut screening, the series that will be released in September 1994 had fairly emerged, and we spent four and a half days. We convened at nine o'clock each morning and screened a two-hour episode, which took about two and a half hours because of reel changes; we then discussed for an hour or two. We ate lunch and in the afternoon began another episode, and then we went out to dinner at the very end and
debriefed all evening; the academic consultants said that they had never worked so hard in their lives as they had for us.

We might be arguing over the wording in a simple sentence. Let me give you an idea. In the fifth inning, or fifth episode, of "Baseball," which documented the 1930s, we had a line that said, "By 1934 the world economy was in ruins. In Germany, Adolf Hitler had come to power and instituted exclusionary laws against Jews based on Jim Crow laws in the United States." It was a very incendiary bit of information, which we had dug up quite accidentally at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., but in the typical fashion of our productions, it had gone into what we call the mix. I had voiced concern that perhaps, in a country known for its historical amnesia or its collapsing of facts, somehow it could be misinterpreted—that even though this was 1934, somehow Jim Crow was responsible for the Final Solution. Working with our consultants, we changed the sentence in several meaningful ways that I think softened the blow or helped to separate that. The final sentence, after we had all gotten through with it, read: "In 1934 the world economy was in ruins and fascism was on the rise. In Germany the National Socialists had come to power and begun to institute exclusionary laws against Jews based, in part, on Jim Crow laws in the United States." So we made four significant changes in that sentence that make it less of a possibility that anyone could misinterpret our intentions.

DT: Do you worry about popular reception and misinterpretation a lot?

KB: Of course. That's essentially one of the things we do. We spend hours and hours going over scripts. Even though that first sentence was factually true, we felt, because we were dealing with a broad popular medium, that it was important to make sure that we were clear; and the script writing is very much a process of that, not so much in worrying what the reaction might be but in learning how to tell a story correctly, learning how to order the subchapters and the sequences within an episode, learning how to plant seeds in episode 1 that will bear fruit in episodes 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7, and then have some kind of conflict and resolution in a later episode. Those are the demands of drama, good history, and our particular art, whatever that is.

DT: Historians are interested in how to synthesize experience. You have said in one interview that film has tremendous power to synthesize.

KB: I was shocked by what I found to be almost the petty and provincial quality of many historians that we talked to about the Civil War, and I was thrilled to find that our film could contain many viewpoints without becoming bland; that it could synthesize what would be called the old school, the Great Men school, with the new history. When you studied the Civil War in high school or college, you would just talk about Lincoln and Davis, Grant and Lee, Sherman and Jackson, that sort of aerial approach to the war. The new history I thought rather snobbishly turned up its nose at the old history, which itself often had really wonderful writing and a phenomonal sense of story. The new history often abandoned narrative completely in
favor of what was supposedly a democratic history from the bottom up. Quite often it did so magnificently, energizing the story of women, labor, and minorities and the social transformation that went on in the country, for example, in the Civil War.

I found that our film could easily contain both approaches, that it would be possible to get to know Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant, at the same time that you could also get to know an ordinary soldier from the South, Sam Watkins, and an ordinary soldier from the North, Elisha Hunt Rhodes. You could follow the fortunes of two towns, Deer Isle, Maine, and Clarksville, Tennessee. You could see what the home front was like, and you could broadly integrate the story of emancipation. Finally, with "The Civil War," the inner core of our story was about slavery and emancipation, and as you will see in the baseball series, which is a sequel to "The Civil War," the theme of race was brought even more broadly into play. The African-American narrative that has traditionally been left out of most histories can be integrated into the whole. I am terrifically excited by this; as we become more needful in our public lives for a history, any history, we can begin to understand the potential of this synthesis. By choosing a subject like baseball that is outside what we would generally call "history"—you ask the man on the street what is history, and he would essentially say that it was a political narrative of wars and generals and presidents—we are suggesting that perhaps an even clearer view of the American story could come about by following a deceptively simple game.

DT: You are talking about synthesis in two ways: a synthesis of the best of the old history and the new, and also a synthesis of the personal story and the great event. Is film a better medium for these kinds of syntheses than, say, writing a book that would attempt to argue the same perspective?

KB: It's a glorious paradox. It is at once not as good and better. It is not as good because the medium is so superficial. It cannot contain the sheer volume of information that a book can very easily do. Film is not able to digress without losing the attention of its subjects the way a book can do. There are many limitations to the form. But after the Civil War, Walt Whitman sat down and said, "Future years will never know the seething hell and the black infernal background, the countless minor scenes and interiors of the secession war. And it is best they should not. The real war," he said, "will never get in the books." I think Whitman was aware of a fundamental limitation in the word to actually bring back experience, and that's where I think the strength of film comes in. It actually cannot bring back accurately, perfectly, an experience, but it can provide an approximation so close that we can begin to feel what it was like back then.

A literate script, albeit not as complicated as a book, combined with first-person testimony, combined with authentic music, combined with an authentic sound-effects track, combined with the comments of scholars and those whose familiarity with the subject is unquestioned, can at times, at rare moments that I spend my life looking for, make the past come alive. In that moment we may have fulfilled what Whitman thought was impossible. I know that even inarticulate viewers of
In 1865 a veteran of the 8th Pennsylvania Volunteers stands with his company's battle flag one last time before returning home. "The Civil War" employed photographs of ordinary people, along with excerpts from diaries and letters, to recreate individual experiences during the war.

*Courtesy National Archives.*
“The Civil War” said to me, “I felt that I was there. I felt that I knew what it was like to be in the Civil War, to be in that time.” That, quite apart from any awards, is the best news the series could have.

DT: And that is the precise point of synthesis that film can do but books can’t?

KB: It’s the synthesis of creating a moment. Film can synthesize the best of the top-down version of history with the bottom-up version of history: it can include a multiplicity of disciplines and approaches without necessarily compromising the integrity of any particular point of view. It is possible to know a Southern experience and at the same time understand the experience of an African American. It is possible to see the war, but briefly, through the eyes of a housewife and still look at the ongoing battle through William Tecumseh Sherman’s eyes as well. These are not contradictory things, and in a book they might be. I think that many of the scholars who criticized “The Civil War” because it didn’t have enough of what they thought it should have been all composed of missed the point and the possibility of this form, which is to bring everyone to the table, to find a common language without so homogenizing the thing that it’s bland. These are certainly extremely passionate series, both “The Civil War” and “Baseball.” They’re not lacking for feeling, nor have they been homogenized by including diverse points of view. It is possible, for example, to appreciate the greatness of Ty Cobb’s ball playing and at the same time reveal and suggest the horror of his personality.

DT: In your synthesis, some historians said about the Civil War series — it doesn’t matter if you agree with them — that the stories of politics were muted and the stories of the military aspects were overdramatized.

KB: I disagree totally with that. I think there’s lots of politics, there’s lots of inner scenes of the thinking of Lincoln, there’s lots of stuff like that. It’s true that we couldn’t do everything, but I have noticed that so much about the Civil War excluded the military stuff for a broad public. I was never taught what happened in the Civil War. I was taught causes, and then I was taught effects. And this happens to be a war in which the outcome of battles mattered, where Americans lost lives, and the only people who seemed to know something about it were the military historians, people who seemed to be so close to the material that they couldn’t see the more meaningful scope of it. The reason why “The Civil War” was so successful is that you had a people literally starved for information about what happened, delivered not by the old military historians, who seemed to miss the point of it, but by someone whose sympathies were entirely with the social and political transformation that was overtaking the country; but people still needed to know that the Battle of Gettysburg actually mattered. And the focus on military history is very appropriate during a war.

DT: Does film have a particular power to synthesize military experiences?

KB: No. It has a particular power to synthesize any history in the kind of narrative and emotional way that I’ve described, at least for me. The fact that it happens to
be a war is just circumstantial, just as I happen to be dealing with baseball games now.

DT: OK. The stories of the individuals put us there. We are listening to this guy write a letter to his wife from the battlefield, sitting around a campfire or wherever he writes the letter; then you have historians arguing whether this was a war over freedom or a war over the preservation of the Union. These seem like two very different activities, that is, trying to put me around a campfire and sitting around a room in the present and arguing, what has this got to do with us?

KB: I disagree. The discussion of why, the larger questions, are absolutely tied to what the people were feeling at that time. If you place your audience there, or you do the best possible job in evoking what it must have been like, which is what I attempted to do, you have actually empowered your audience to participate in a discussion of how the war came about or why it was fought. Only those who seek to use and manipulate history for polemical ends can find real fault in that, because what this style of filmmaking doesn’t do is tell people how to think.

It sets in motion the broad range of conflicting feelings and ideas about why the war came and allows an audience to participate in the struggle to understand it. For a Southerner, it was not a question of perpetuating slavery once the war began (even though slavery is the cause of the war, which we said categorically in the first episode of the film); the reasons men fought were very very complicated. What I think the film did really well was to show why a Union soldier would fight. The abstract notion of union and emancipation for a young Northerner hardly seems worth leaving a farm that you’ve never strayed more than fifty miles from in, say, Minnesota and traveling 1,500–2,000 miles to die or to leave a part of your body in soil with unfamiliar names—that’s certainly there in our film, and it helps add in even more eerily clear language some of the larger questions that are, as you point out, sort of above and beyond the campfire. You know, if you write down that you can’t understand why you are so happy living on a diet of worms and why you should have gained twelve pounds so doing, as Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain says, to me that speaks volumes about what this war was about. The public saw that very clearly.

DT: You mentioned public response. In fact, do you study your audiences at all in doing this?

KB: No. I am the audience. As we’re editing it, I deliberately try to keep myself innocent so I can receive the film new each time. If I have one gift, I think it is that I have an ability in the editing room to be my audience’s representative, to demand, from the film that I am making, something that an interested but ignorant member of the audience, an eighth grader perhaps, might need to know to keep them in their chair.

DT: What about audience in another sense, like funders?

KB: No. I try to articulate and enthusiastically describe the project I intend, but I don’t choose my subjects with underwriting in mind. Some are very difficult, some
are less difficult. Nothing has ever been easy. My proposal to the National Endowment for the Humanities for my baseball film, for example, coming as it did on the heels of the tremendous success of "The Civil War," was still over twice as long as the one we wrote for "The Civil War" because there was, I felt, rather snobbish suspicion of the historical legitimacy of a series on baseball. Many people thought it was frivolous and not as revelatory as we believed, and therefore I felt it required a redoubling of my effort to convince.

DT: Really?

KB: Yes. Sports histories have not reached the mainstream. The metaphor that I was choosing to tell about baseball needed to be sold, whereas the Civil War needed less of that because it is generally accepted to be the most defining moment in the history of the country. My argument was that if you wished to know the country that the Civil War made us, you could find no better vehicle to find that out than studying our national pastime. This is the story of race, the age-old tensions between labor and management, the history of immigration and assimilation, the exclusion of women, the rise of popular media, advertising, and popular culture, the growth and decay of cities; all of these broad themes were on display in our national pastime and in near perfect collision throughout the history of the game.

DT: Referring back to your audience, what did people tell you about "The Civil War"?

KB: I have thousands of letters, and they are almost as articulate and often as beautiful as the letters we included in the various Civil War diaries we used. They talk to me about a country that's starved for national self-definition today, a country malnourished by a lack of history, a people needing and responding to something slightly more intelligent than the usual fare but clearly involved with the powerful emotions that always exist just under the surface of an examination of the most important moments in our past. Those letters are so stunningly powerful that it just made my heart soar, because we always say nobody knows how to write any more, nobody really cares about history any more, and it was not true.

DT: I think our readers would be interested in the letters, in what you take to be the way Americans experience your series: what they like about it, what they don't like about it, how they engage it.

KB: Ninety-eight percent of the mail was wildly enthusiastic; people told us that the Civil War series had sent them back into their own personal family histories to rescue ancestors long forgotten, that the words and the music in the Sullivan Ballou sequence were used at funerals and at weddings, that couples rededicated their love for one another, that people grieved through "The Civil War" for family members recently lost, that they saw American history in a different light, many of these things. The remaining 2 percent was nearly evenly divided, a little more to the Southern side, between those who felt that we had betrayed the Southern cause, that we were perpetuating a Northern Yankee hegemony on Civil War history, and
that we had been unfair to the South. The other 1 percent had felt that we had leaned over backwards and had been too fair to the South, that we had missed the point that the story was only about emancipation and the social transformation in the country, that anything that included military history was a glorification of war or missing the point or a version of an old nineteenth-century romantic history, and that anything that showed any kind of sympathy for Southerners was so morally bankrupt that we should be ashamed.

DT: So, if I'm understanding you right, 2 percent deal with political perspective?

KB: Political or historical/polemical perspective.

DT: And 98 percent of the people took what you had done and put it into their own lives?

KB: Yes, and really integrated it in an interesting way:

Dear Sir:

Again I am watching the Civil War. Enthralled, inspired, heartbroken. So much to think about, so much to feel. The eloquence of ordinary people resounds. It humbles me. Such dignity in the archival faces of my people who were enslaved, but who never surrendered their souls to slavery. I hear the southerners who not only kept my ancestors in bondage, but fought to the death to do so, and I hate them for that. Then the choir in your film sings, “Do You, Do You Want Your Freedom?” A good question, for we are not yet truly free, none of us. To achieve that, white America must abandon its racial conceits and I must abandon my hate. They must change and I must forgive for us both to be free. Lincoln was right, “Malice toward none, charity for all.” So at the end I wonder, does my white counterpart hearing that choir realize that that final question is meant for both of us? Do you, do you want your freedom? I know what my answer is. I will wait for his. A brilliant work, sir. Thank you.

DT: Bravo.

KB: A woman wrote,

... I watched the Civil War with a puzzling sense of recurring memory until I recognized it as an American Bhagavad Gita with its paradox of love and conflict, genius and ignorance, and finally the human transcendence that may one day show us where the real battles need to be fought quite apart from geography. I look at present times from a different place now and can only wish that more and more people can be touched by your wonderful work. ...

DT: Those are great.

KB: Yes, and they have an eloquence that belies the oft-stated assumption that we Americans no longer know how to write the way they used to back in the Civil War. All of the letters have been touchingly poetic in that way. They’re really amazingly powerful letters, and I must tell you that I weep and cry and get very involved because that’s the way I made the film.
DT: I can see why.

KB: And then you get one that says, how many pieces of silver did Ken Burns pay you, Mr. Foote, to sell out the Southern cause? And someone else will write vitriically that to have included any sympathy for the South was a mistake. And I saw this as the story of a vast and complicated American family, just as the story of "Baseball" is the continuation of that saga. And that family had many members, and to make facile categorical absolute judgments about people was a mistake, that it was important as Americans to breathe in our own complicity with the sin of slavery and all that goes with it. And it was also possible to find real salvation in the works, the actions, and the writings of great human beings like Abraham Lincoln and ordinary soldiers like Elisha Hunt Rhodes. I think the series does that.

DT: You speak of the starving for understanding or engagement with the past.

KB: I think there's a sense that the past might be some kind of healing or medicinal force, that knowing where you've been arms you in the best kind of way for proceeding forward into the future; there was a sense that people were grateful for having a window on something that they had either misunderstood or had only the most superficial information about, or they were just overwhelmed by the emotion of our presentation.

DT: Do you think that this particular subject, the Civil War, had something to do with it?

KB: Yes, I think that for an American this is the traumatic event in the childhood of our nation, and we cannot help but respond to any kind of referral to that traumatic event. My own mother died when I was eleven, and there wasn't a moment in my life when she wasn't sick; it was very similar in analogy to the Civil War. I began my life constantly aware of this impending doom, just as we began our republic aware that we had not taken care of the issue of slavery. Four score and five years later we began a war to settle at least the question of slavery and union once and for all. There has never been a moment when our country has not been in the consequences of that battle, just as my life has never been free of the consequences of my mother's death. I think I brought a very powerful emotional relationship to my exploration of the Civil War that relates very clearly to my own personal psychology, but in so doing I helped remind people of the power of that war, the defining, as Shelby Foote said, power of that war. "Baseball" is an attempt to go to the emotional heart of the histories of the people that we became once that war was done. Remember the first great movement in civil rights after World War II (civil rights was largely abandoned after the Civil War) was not at a lunch counter, not on a city bus, not in a school in Topeka, but on the diamonds of our national past-time when Jackie Robinson integrated baseball in 1947.

DT: Based on your experience and maybe particularly these letters, would you have any advice for academic historians who are indeed interested in reaching out to audiences beyond each other?
KB: I think that the important thing they have to remember is the common denominator of speaking to a lot of people: you have to be a good writer, you have to be a good communicator. Those formal considerations are as important as the content if you wish to reach a large number of people. Once you perhaps sanctimoniously abandon formal considerations as being ahistorical or unnecessary in the communication of empirical facts, you have lost the way human beings speak to one another. That's Aristotelian poetics. It is necessary to speak about a story in certain conventions that humans expect, and there's nothing wrong in artfully adhering to those conventions if you do so free of formula. And then I would remember what Judge Learned Hand said, that liberty was never being too sure you're right — that it was important to leave things open, to acknowledge the ambiguity, to tolerate opposing points of view. Arthur Schlesinger has articulated our dilemma quite well not just in the country as a whole but within the discipline of history, there's too much pluribus and not enough unum. We now have a country and an academy pulling in a million different directions, promoting each particular singular view as the truth, when in fact we know that none of it is all of the truth. Those truths can be synthesized into one cohesive whole; that's the genius of our Constitution, the ability to create a framework, a formal set of rules that can tolerate the broadest range of human perspective. If the academy doesn't mirror that, then it has the same kind of totalitarian dogma that we have sought to rid ourselves of in our body politic.

DT: The key to that would be audience, would it?

KB: No. Because you have to be honorable enough to know that if you do your work and you happen to be drawn to a particular subject that does not speak broadly, you are not going to change your mandate to bring people into the tent. This is not a patent medicine drumming, this is not revival meetings, this is literally trying to do good history.

DT: Do you think that historians arguing their different points of view or their pluribus are trying to persuade the uncommitted or writing for each other, for the other historians who already agree with them?

KB: I think they are nearly always writing for themselves and for other historians. I would agree with you that they have forgotten a kind of responsibility of the historian, it seems to me, to find a way to share whatever findings you have—not just with your colleagues. There's nothing wrong in writing a boring and abstruse historical paper, an abstract that will be read only by a few hundred perhaps interested colleagues. There is something wrong with not also at the same time attempting to find a way to share your insight with a larger public, and if there is not an aspect to your work that you can share with a larger public, that ought to tell you something about the ultimate value of your “insight.”

DT: If we had one of those historians sitting here, and we do, do you have any further advice on how I might go about doing this?
KB: I think no idea is abstruse if it can be ultimately given a form that can be communicated to someone else. Basically, if you are interested in popular history, you just have to ask yourself the questions: How do I tell this story? Who is listening? Who do I want to hear? I answered those questions very simply. It may be that a historian chooses not to do that, that he or she wishes only to speak to colleagues. That's fine, I suppose. I have a problem with that. I really think that we have in the last century made history just another subject rather than the broad pageant of everything that comes before this moment, and I mean everything that comes before this moment; the beginnings of our conversation are now history. Having a view like that allows one to have an appreciation for the past and our investigation of it that overshadows and dwarfs every other subject, and that is the way I feel about it, and that is the way I feel about American history. I feel that it is a tonic, something that has a possibility of healing the great divisions that bedevil our country today, and I intend to sing the epic verses of our story, not a Pollyanna-ish story, but in fact a very complicated and dark and tragic story. One needs only to see "The Civil War" or the baseball series to understand that this is not a sanitized morning-in-America version of history.

DT: But you know that an awful lot of people use history not to heal but to actually define points of battle.

KB: That's right. And in a society like ours that's perfectly all right as well. I just think that there is a limitation to the kind of polemics implied by that or by the single-mindedness, the tunnel vision, in the idea that only I know how history should be—using history as a weapon, if you will. That is just one short step away from the hegemony of propaganda.

DT: How do you impose a story of unity or healing on a story that is about a war?

KB: That is the great paradox of it. We state this paradox in one of the first sentences of our narration: "Between 1861 and 1865 Americans made war on each other and killed each other in great numbers if only to become the kind of country that could no longer conceive how that was possible." You know the nursery rhyme—

There was a man lived in our town
And he was wondrous wise.
He jumped into a bramble bush
And scratched out both his eyes.
But when he'd seen what he had done,
With all his might and main,
He jumped back in the bramble bush
And scratched them in again.

That's the story of the Civil War. That's the great paradox, and no amount of empirical thinking will ever put its arm around it. But the toleration of these kinds of emotional variances is where this synthesis emerges; it's being able to appreciate Nathan Bedford Forrest and Stonewall Jackson, and in the same breath realizing that
Wendell Phillips may be right in saying that Abraham Lincoln is a first-rate second-rate man. This is what our series did. It just had it all there, and forty million people responded to it.

DT: I'm trying to pick up on the healing notion.

KB: Go back to my example of a personal history. When an individual has, say, an identity crisis, you send him to a therapist. The first thing the therapist wants to know is, where did you come from, who are your parents, that is to say, what is your history? In the exploration of the nooks and crannies of that history, however painful, are the seeds of healing; and history, if done in that open-ended way, can be about something tragic and divisive like race relationships, apartheid, segregation, lynchings, and at the same time, through an honest and, I would say, artistically presented investigation, it has the possibility of healing by shedding light on the traumas that exist not just in our individual psyches but in our national psyche.

DT: In the end we probably take sides as between Frederick Douglass and Nathan Bedford Forrest.

KB: Sure. You can take sides; there's nothing wrong with that, and I think our series clearly did. If you have a family album, and you open it up and you are showing your kids your family album and you say, "Gee, that's Uncle So-and-So. He was not a very nice guy." Do you then rip that picture out? Or you say, "There's Grandpa So-and-So. He was the kindest man I ever met." "There's Aunt Bea. She was the best." Do you see what I mean? You need to include at the same time—the broad act of tolerance and inclusion does not in any way forbid you to discriminate. In the Civil War series we made it absolutely clear that there was one singular villain and that was the institution of slavery in our glorious land, within that it's very clear the relative importance of Frederick Douglass to Nathan Bedford Forrest.

DT: One story of the Civil War is the two sides hated each other and went to war. Another story of the Civil War is the war ended and slavery was abolished. These seem like very different themes.

KB: No. They're not. They are exactly what happened, and they are both in the series, and it's very clear from the opening scene, which is a dramatic indictment of slavery, that giving voice to people who own slaves does not in any way mean that the filmmakers subscribe to that.

DT: You obviously read reviews of the film. What struck you about those reviews? Anything you thought you learned from?

KB: They are so overwhelmingly positive that you need to ignore them so the ego does not get inflated, and I've done a pretty good job of doing that. It was essentially that we had touched a chord within people that in some ways gave them back their history, gave them back a curiosity about themselves. We spawned the sale of literally tens of millions of dollars worth of Civil War books, and that can only be good news.
DT: Is that actually true?

KB: Oh, God, yes. Shelby called me up one day and said, "You made me a millionaire."

DT: I'll be darned.

KB: His books in fifteen years had sold 30,000 sets; in the next six months I think they sold over 100,000 sets. Bookstores all across the country put in Civil War sections that had never had them before. Elisha Hunt Rhodes's diary sold tens of thousands of copies as soon as it was published. It was a phenomenal thing. Civil War is now broadly taught in the curriculum; the Civil War videotapes are the best-selling nonfiction documentary series on history ever made. Schools use them. I still get letters from teachers. In the course of speaking I bump into people who say, "I can't teach history without your film." It's just overwhelming. It makes the kind of debate that we had somewhat beside the point, you know. My mail was 98 percent in favor; 1 percent said you were biased against the South; the other said you were biased for the South. So I knew that I had done a good job, and that the kind of argument we're having is existing in those peripheral 2 percent of the thing. Even within the academic community there are a few loud people who I think have used a criticism of my film to advance their own polemic because the film is not attempting to replace or supplant anything in the academy; it's merely wishing to go directly to a public and say, this is what happened in my view. Period. And my view isn't the only view.

DT: The issue we're going to put this interview in is based on a survey of readers of the *Journal of American History*, and one of the most common themes of these readers is a lament that we as historians have lost touch or failed . . .

KB: I believe you have failed and lost touch absolutely in the communication of history to the public and that it has fallen to the amateur historians, if you will, to try to rescue that history; I would hope that the academy could change course and join a swelling chorus of interest in history for everyone.

DT: I really appreciate this very much. Thank you very kindly.