After the Fact | In Conversation With Ken Burns: America's Story of Revolution, Liberty, and Democracy

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TRANSCRIPT

Dan LeDuc, host, "After the Fact" podcast: Divisive times with sometimes brother pitted against brother, father against son. If that sounds familiar or even contemporary, it is how this nation began. Next year marks the 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States when colonialists—though not all of them, hence those divisions—broke with the British crown in a war that we now call the American Revolution. It's the subject of Ken Burns' latest documentary, all six parts over 12 hours.

For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc. We had spoken with Ken Burns before about his unique creative process, and he recently hosted us again to talk about his new film and a war that is over but a revolution that many say continues. Ken Burns. Thank you for, again, welcoming us here to New Hampshire, and your lovely barn and studio.

Ken Burns, documentary filmmaker:: Glad to have you back.

Dan LeDuc: Yes. We are here to talk about the American Revolution. Is it the story of our democracy?

Ken Burns: Democracy is an unintended consequence of the Revolution. It is, of course, an attempt to redress grievances that the colonists in North America had against Britain about taxes and representation, which were taught in grade school. But one of the myths about the American Revolution is that it's a kind of bloodless gallant story, and it's not. It's our original civil war. It's incredibly violent. And a lot of our mythologies about this period are kind of smothered in sentimentality. I like to say this is not just a clash between Englishmen over Indian land and taxes and representation, but a bloody struggle that would engage more than two dozen nations, European as well as Native American. That also somehow came to be about the noblest aspirations of humankind.

Dan LeDuc: We are, as a nation, celebrating 250 years. So, the American Revolution and story is 250 years old. It feels like it's the oldest story of our nation, but I'm wondering, is it an ongoing story?

Ken Burns: Benjamin Rush from Philadelphia, well-known physician, wrote, "The American war is over, but the American Revolution is going on." If you look at the language of our most sacred documents, we

say, “pursuit of happiness” in the Declaration; we say “a more perfect union.” We are a nation in the process of becoming. So, what's great is that’s given Americans a sense of process from the beginning. The old saying goes, “It's not the in, at the end of the journey, it's the road.” This new thing that we were creating—not just a nation—the idea of a citizen. Everybody before this had been subjects. Now you're a citizen, and that means you've got huge responsibilities. The founders are all desperately worried about whether there was enough virtue, and that was the word they used over and over again.

Dan LeDuc: Throughout your career you have made films about this nation, and it's always felt to me like each film was a prism on the nation. It was country music, it was jazz, it was baseball, it was our Vietnam experience. Is the story of the American Revolution more foundational to all of those? I'm curious how you see it fitting into what you do.

Ken Burns: You know, I'm a collector of quilts.

Dan LeDuc: Yes. I'm looking at them all here; they’re beautiful.

Ken Burns: And I've always loved them because my work involves sort of solving mysteries, going into something and learning as much as you can. And the quilts you have to just accept as stories that you don't know much about. Like, it may be signed, and it may even say the date, but you don't know if she's 18 or 28 or 88, happy, sad, married, alone, you just don't know. And I sort of think the different stories, woven together, make up a quilt. I've made films for the last 50 years about the U.S., but I've also made films about us. That is to say that lowercase two-letter, plural pronoun, and all of the majesty and complexity and contradiction and even controversy of the U.S. And it is a privilege and a magnificent space to try to exist in for so many years.

Dan LeDuc: You have had this American focus; it's been brilliant through all these prisms. Why that focus? What is it about the American story that draws you?

Ken Burns: I've just been possessed by American history since I was a little boy. The map above my bed when I was growing up was a, a map of the United States. It had the physical borders of the states, but in dotted lines. And it had 300 Native American Tribes too. When I figured out at age 12, I wanted to be a filmmaker. At age 18, that it would be documentary. By 22, it was in American history. But even then, if you told me, 50 years later that I'd still be doing this, I'd go, no, no. I'd be doing other stuff. But I have the best job in the country. And if I were given another thousand years to live, you know which I won't be, I would not run out of topics in American history. It's an obsession.

Dan LeDuc: You've used the word virtue in our conversation already, and the description of the film talks about the virtues and the contradictions of the war for independence. So, if you were just going to list a couple of the virtues and contradictions, what are we talking about?

Ken Burns: The founders are anxious that we have an ideal based on Greek and, and Roman ideals of what virtue might be, what a good life lived might be. And at the same time, these are human beings, and they are subject to all of the sins that the flesh is heir to. So even with somebody like George Washington—and our film is very clear from the get-go that we don't have a country without him, and at the same time, he's deeply flawed. He's rash. He rides out onto the battlefield, risking everything. And people, his aides, are covering their eyes at, uh, Princeton. At Monmouth, he stops a retreat, but he's right out there. Any sniper could have taken him down if they'd understood the moment. But we like to think of the idea of a hero as perfect, right?

Well, if you go back to the Greeks, the hero is not perfect. The hero is an interesting combination of strengths and weaknesses that defines heroism. And so this idea of perfection that in our simplistic binary media culture, where everything is a one or a zero, we've really misled ourselves. And if you are just putting a white hat on somebody or a black hat on somebody, you've done a disservice to the story and you've done a disservice to history.

Dan LeDuc: How is your perspective as the storyteller changed over this last half century?

Ken Burns: Well, I think the changes happened to me within each film project. Within the American Revolution story, though, like, I'm still stunned at that it becomes this bloody, bloody civil war. There are changes of dominance between the British and allies and the patriots in states, in which it is so violent and so vicious. I mean, more British and Hessian troops were killed in kind of gorilla actions like assassinations and ambushes than they were in any set battles.

Dan LeDuc: But of course, even within families—I mean, you can look at Ben Franklin and his son being the most obvious example, but that was told a thousand times over.

Ken Burns: This is the most important thing is that civil war divides families. The brother against brother thing that got applied to the civil war is so rare in the civil war compared to what had happened in the Revolution. Franklin's own son William is the royal governor of New Jersey. He's deposed by patriots. He's in prison. They let him go thinking he'll scurry back to London, the place he loves so much. And instead, he starts a terrorist organization. Murdering patriots just as there are patriot organizations murdering loyalists. This is a story that is repeated almost everywhere during the American Revolution.

Dan LeDuc: After the fact, right, the winner gets to write history is the old saying. Um, by going back as a historian and the work of other historians who you admire, what's that value to us today to actually know what happened?

Ken Burns: I don't know what we're afraid of. What do you know if your umpire's calling balls and strikes? Yes, Babe Ruth and Reggie Jackson strike out a lot, but they also hit a lot of home runs.

We understand that in our own lives and relationships, but we don't extend that in our politics or our media. Everything's a one or a zero. Everything's binary. Even in my editing room downtown, we've got a little neon sign in cursive that says, “It's complicated.” Because filmmakers, if a scene is working, you don't wanna touch it. But, we're always finding information that like undercuts the story, but it makes it better if you're willing to sacrifice what's a good story for what's a truer story. I think the American Revolution is the most important event since the birth of Christ. I will defend that period. Full stop. It's certainly the most consequential revolution in history as we say. It is, of course, the thing that inspires more than two centuries of other revolutions. But this is, this is a big, big deal.

Dan LeDuc: I saw you saying that somewhere else, that this was sort of the greatest event in human history.

Ken Burns: Since the birth of Christ.

Dan LeDuc: And what makes it so?

Ken Burns: Because the most important words in our history are "we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal." It's the second-most important sentence in the English language. After I love you.

Dan LeDuc: You plan very far in advance for when your films are going to be released.

Ken Burns: Actually, we don't plan for when they're gonna be released. We plan to do them, and they take a long time. When I started this project, Barack Obama had 13 months to go in his presidency. The idea of a 250th was on no one's mind, including mine. Then people began talking about it and then come back to me and say, oh, you planned it this way. And I'm like, no. Nope. We don't have an agenda. We don't have a political thumb to put on the scale. Sure, we're calling balls and strikes. And when the film comes out, it will have the opportunity, I hope, to have something that we share in common.

Dan LeDuc: Well, this film is getting at America’s earliest roots. Do you think it will help engage Americans during these divided times?

Ken Burns: You use the word prism, and I think that’s really good in which something is refracted. And each little story, each big story adds to our understanding of who we are. I've said I've made the same film over and over again, and each film asks one deceptively simple question: Who are we? Who are those strange and complicated people that like to call themselves Americans? And what does an investigation of the past tell us about not only that moment, but this moment, and our future like where we've been, to know where we are, to know where we're going. This is the essential obligation of history, I think.

Ken Burns: The novelist Richard Powers said the best arguments in the world won't change a single person's point of view. The only thing that can do that is a good story. And I likened it once to a benevolent Trojan horse that you invite a good story in and it doesn't come out in the night to slaughter you or to burn down the city, but to transform you with complexity, to transform you with the fact that if we share the same past, could that not be the beginning?

Dan LeDuc: You often find that person or episode that has been forgotten, lost to history. Did you find those in this story?

Ken Burns: I would like to just throw this out, that we tend to keep the women out of this. The women are there at the battles, with children. They're part of the cleanup afterwards. I'd argue that among them are a slew of really great writers. Abigail Adams may be the best writer of them all. John Adams is, is wonderful. And so the fact that they're a part and they're corresponding is like a gift to this.

Dan LeDuc: How did you define when the Revolutionary War ended?

Ken Burns: It ends after George Washington steps down. The fact that he surrendered his military and then his political control is the American example of giving up power. Of understanding that the highest office in the land is actually the citizen. And it's that sort of sense of ongoing revolution even today.

Dan LeDuc: Even today.

Ken Burns: I mean, as the historian Rick Atkinson says, “We wanna find out what people were willing to die for.” And that's the thing. You look at this, and I hope people say, which side would I be on? It's perfectly understandable to be a loyalist. That says, I live under the greatest system of government on Earth. True. The British constitutional monarchy, my prosperity and my education, my health is all tied in with that. Why would I want to change that for some radical idea, right? I mean, two ministers are talking in Boston and said, who would you rather be led by, a tyrant 3,000 miles away or 3,000 tyrants a mile away? You know?

Dan LeDuc: I like that.

Ken Burns: And that's a really good question. At the time of the Revolution, when there are mobs all around and they're tarring and feathering loyalists and representatives of the crown, and it's not a comical thing. Tarring and feathering—it's torture. It's torture. I mean, it's a complicated dynamic, and if you're gonna share in the blessings of it, you gotta be willing to stick through the whole story.

Dan LeDuc: As divided as we are, Americans seem to agree on one thing, which is three-fourths of us say that this nation used to be a good example of democracy. And now isn't. Is that threat actually though throughout our history?

Ken Burns: I think this sense of the possibilities of us ebbs and wanes and, and right now it's low. But there's something extraordinarily unique about our possibilities, about our story. Lincoln knew it. He said, “If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of free men, we must live through all time or die by suicide.” So there it is. The gauntlet's down right there. It's really our responsibility to take the messages that issued from our founding. That's what Gettysburg address is. It's 2.0. Look, we really do mean all men are created equal. To Jefferson's, and Lincoln helped expand that, and so our job is to continually expand that definition, not to shrink it back.

Dan LeDuc: Your films have always had, uh, ongoing life also, and, and with young people in schools you've talked about this film as being something you hope will engage young people and get them to appreciate what we've inherited. How does it do that and how would you encourage that?

Ken Burns: Usually about a year out from the finish or the broadcast of a film, we begin to think about educational outreach. And the interesting thing about this is that we began to think about the educational outreach about four years out and began to work earnestly. So we've done that for each film, but it's more robust here because I think the stakes are higher. Not because things are so dire, but because it's really important to get our origin story right. People say, who's this for? And you go, everybody, you know, why I mean, isn't a good story for everybody? Like a good joke, right. You know? Mark Twain said, “It's not that the world is filled with fools, it's just that lightning isn't distributed right.”

And I mean, that will be funny for as long as there are human beings. And everybody gets it. It doesn't matter, you know, which side of the political divide you're on. That's just funny, and that's what you look for, the thing that we share in common.

Dan LeDuc: I've always remembered this little exchange where Elizabeth Willing Powell, the Philadelphia socialite, asked Benjamin Franklin, “Well, what have we got?”

Ken Burns: Elizabeth Willing Powell is a leading lady of Philadelphia. There's not one thing in the Constitution that, that gives her any rights. But she asked Franklin, what have you created Dr. Franklin, a monarchy or a republic? And he says, a republic, if you can keep it. And it's really, really an important thing. It's the way he says it that means that there's an obligation that each and every one of us has to understand it. To not just sort of say, oh yeah, I get it. I'm free. I can do this. I'm an American too, in a sort of kneejerk way, and then to take it upon yourself, not, you know. Twain also said, “Nothing so needs reforming as other people's habits,” you know, and so, and not presume that the activity has to be by your neighbor.

You've gotta assume the responsibility for citizenship and then move it forward. How do you advance the citizenship? Look, we're all in this together.

Dan LeDuc: You have been telling this story about this nation for a half century. So storyteller, have you developed your conclusions or any prognostications about this subject matter? This nation of ours?

Ken Burns: There are no conclusions because conclusions would mean that we were over and done with. There are no prognostications because historians, even amateur ones, which I am, make lousy seers. But there is a sense of, of, of potentiality that, that is so moving and sometimes really exhilarating, that you can feel suffused throughout the story of the Revolution. In the darkest days, I mean, on Lexington Green, on April 19, 1775, the chances of success against the greatest military power on Earth are zero. Six years later, six and a half years later, it's 100%.

I like the story of how that zero goes to 100%. And um, we're still in that realm of possibility. We still have it within our power to take the energy of the Revolution, the best of it and make it and shape it for ourselves and our posterity. And that's, that's our biggest responsibility. And then we will, as Lincoln predicted, live through all time and not by suicide.

Dan LeDuc: Ken Burns, thank you so much.

Ken Burns: Thank you.

Dan LeDuc: The American Revolution premiers on PBS, running from Nov. 16 through the 21st. And on Nov. 24, PBS airs a special with Ken Burns and others at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia called “A More Perfect Union”—a discussion of America’s founding ideals and virtues and how they can inspire civic—and civil—conversations today.

You can learn more about all that—and listen to our previous conversation about Ken Burns’ creative process—at pew.org/afterthefact. For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I’m Dan LeDuc, and this is After the Fact.