

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION CHANGED...

By TROY BRAMSTON

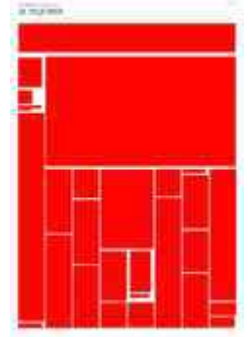
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THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION CHANGED EVERYTHING



TROY BRAMSTON

SENIOR WRITER

Documentarian Ken Burns talks about the bloody battles that gave the world a nation based on 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness'

Ken Burns is the greatest documentarian of our time. With films such as *The Civil War* (1990), *Baseball* (1994), *Jazz* (2001), *The Roosevelts* (2014), *The Vietnam War* (2017), *Country Music* (2019), *Muhammad Ali* (2021) and *Hemingway* (2021), he has become the chief film chronicler of the American story.

His directing technique, bringing old photos to life to wake up the dead, along with expert historical analysis, artistic re-enactments and readings, seasonal cinematography, paintings, maps and drawings, and forgotten moving images, has been groundbreaking for the genre and is widely studied by students.

Now comes perhaps his most ambitious project, *The American Revolution*, spanning six episodes across 12 hours co-directed with Sarah Botstein and David Schmidt, and co-written with long-time collaborator Geoffrey C. Ward. An

exquisite large format hardcover companion book is published by Alfred A. Knopf.

Burns expertly guides us from the battles at Lexington and Concord in 1775 to the Continental Congress that adopted the Declaration of Independence in 1776, through the long struggle of George Washington's army, to the British surrender at Yorktown in 1781 and Treaty of Paris two years later. It is the most consequential revolution ever.

The founding of the US, conceived in lofty ideals and achieved in bloody battle, begins earlier of course, with dispossession of native lands and attempts at redress from the British over the Stamp Act. This enthralling origin story, unknowable destination, twists and turns, and legacy, is masterfully told.

It examines the flawed concept of liberty that denied freedom to African-Americans, and explains the reasons Native Americans and African-Americans fought for patriots and loyalists. The usual rendering of this story and common iconography of men in wigs and tights, and armies of white men, is challenged from the get-go.

The revolution is enveloped in myth. It is not culture, religion or history that unites a people but a set of goals and ambitions. The founders were driven initially by commerce and land more than anything. It is violent, not only in conflict between redcoats and continental soldiers but also among everyday people in their streets and homes. It explains much about the US today.

Leading historians Joseph Ellis, Rick Atkinson, Annette Gordon-Reed, Gordon Wood and Stacy Schiff provide expert analysis. The documentary includes a stellar cast reading letters, diaries and notes: Meryl Streep, Tom Hanks, Claire Danes, Samuel L. Jackson, Michael Keaton, Morgan Freeman, Ethan

Hawke, Damian Lewis, Laura Linney, Paul Giamatti, Edward Norton, Josh Brolin and Kenneth Branagh.

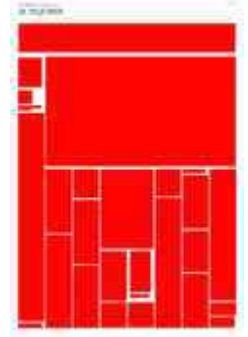
In an interview with *Inquirer*, Burns talks about the 10 years and \$US30m it took to make the film, his rejection of nostalgic and simplified narratives in favour of complexity and contradictions, and how to assess figures such as Washington and Thomas Jefferson. "I drop anything for Australians," Burns, 72, says as we settle in for an animated conversation.

TROY BRAMSTON: You tell a story of a revolution in ideas but

also a bloody revolution between patriots and loyalists. Is this the first civil war?

KEN BURNS: I'd argue that it's the most important event in world history since the birth of Christ because of the power and the inspiration, and the effect those ideas have had, in the subsequent 250 years since. But it is a bloody civil war. It is also a global war, the fourth or fifth global war over the prize of North America, engaging not just the British against the Americans, but obviously the French come in, as do the Spanish and the Dutch. And it is fought not just on the eastern seaboard but in the Caribbean, off the coast of England and France, in the Mediterranean and the subcontinent of India and what is now The Philippines. Of course, the word prize means land owned by indigenous people. It is a story not unfamiliar to Australians, who continue to wrestle, as we do, with a shameful aspect of our history having to do with the displacement and the dispossession of native peoples.

What was quite striking, from the beginning, is the violence: there's insurrection, there's rebellion, there's revenge, there's terrorism, there's politics that spills out into



physical confrontation. Did you fully realise that when you were making previous documentaries set in the same era?

No, I don't think I had. I'm so happy that you've seen the previous films, none of them are me telling you what you should know. They're me sharing with you what we learned – our process of discovery. A lot of this has to do with how we like to tell our own stories. We've had a kind of superficial, sanitised, Madison Avenue version of our revolution which is just great men thinking great thoughts in Philadelphia. And by the way, they are really great and they are really great thoughts and we do not neglect them. But it's incredibly violent. It's incredibly dramatic. It's incredibly poignant. It's an incredibly tragic story for native peoples. It is obviously the postponement of freedom for enslaved people and for women who understand what the word liberty means and want it just as their husbands do. Democracy is not the object of the American revolution; it is an ironic unintended consequence of it.

I have a 1976 series of issues published by Time Magazine marking the 200th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. It's all about grand ideals, and these great white men brought about this revolution, but you set

out to challenge that. There are also commercial imperatives, land imperatives. How have Americans come to see this differently than they would have 50 years ago?

I was 24 when the bicentennial happened. It was all that kind of jingoistic celebration of what we had done. But I would suggest that this distillation of the Enlightenment into one remarkable sentence (in the Declaration of Independence) that ignited the creation of the US also ignited revolutions all across the world in Europe and in Central and Southern America, and in Asia and Africa, and went on for more than 200 years. At the same time, the story of what happened is much more complicated. And I think that the reason why we have encrusted our revolution with the barnacles

of sentimentality and nostalgia is that we fear that by getting into it we will somehow diminish those big ideas. I disagree. I think by showing the real story, those big ideas are even bigger and more inspirational.

Let's go back to the Declaration of Independence. I want to ask you about "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness". Why "happiness" and not, say, "property"? And the word "pursuit". Why are those two words – "happiness" and "pursuit" – so important?

Oh, you're a man after my own heart. You've hit the nail on the head there. Yes, you could have followed John Locke and say "life, liberty, property". This is a revolution of property men who want to make sure that their rights as property owners are respected by the British and their quarrel is just that: over taxes and representation and their ability to steal Native American land. And the upset grows into tumult and suddenly because of the Enlightenment, these break out into not just British rights but natural rights and transcendent liberties. And so, it is interesting that Jefferson said "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness". And what they meant by the word

happiness was not the acquisition of things in a marketplace of objects but lifelong learning in a marketplace of ideas. Everybody else has been a subject under authoritarian rule. Suddenly you were citizens with great responsibilities and in order to earn the right of citizenship, you had to be virtuous. In order to be virtuous, you had to improve yourself. You had to show humility and temperance and restraint and generosity and all of these classical virtues. But you're right, the key word throughout the American experiment is pursuit of happiness. You're not meant to achieve it; you're supposed to move towards it. Eleven years later with the constitution in 1787, it's a more perfect union. So you have this idea of a nation in the process of becoming.

Jefferson, edited by Benjamin Franklin, also wrote "that all men

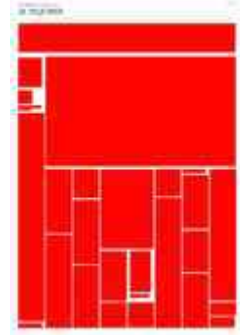
are created equal". Yet the contradictions in himself, as a slave owner, are there at the time.

At the beginning of that sentence, he meant all white men of property free of debt. And he owned other human beings. He knew that was wrong, as did most of the slave owners. So what happens is that he writes a sentence that's vague. And

as the conservative scholar that I was speaking with recently, Yuval Levin, said, "The word 'all' is it. Once you put the word 'all' in, it's all over." Meaning, yes, it takes four score and nine years before slavery ends. Yes, it takes 144 just reprehensible years for women to get suffrage. But it's done. And so slavery was not an issue of contention before the revolution. Once the revolution started and from thereafter, it was the No.1 issue in the country. And that, I think, is a tribute to the vagueness of Jefferson's words. We're in a world in which it's all binaries and they don't exist in nature. So, you either throw Washington or Jefferson out or you pay no attention to these flaws. Well, no. You tell a good story and everybody's got complications. Achilles has his heel and his hubris to go along with his great strength.

Let's talk about Washington. You note his complexity and his contradictions. He retreats or loses more battles than he wins. You don't follow "the great man theory of history" as a rule, but would the revolution have been won without him?

No. In this case, you know, the great man theory applies. And in fact, one of our historians, Christopher Brown, shakes his head, breaks the fourth wall for the only time in the film and gets almost frustrated. He says, "I don't believe in the great man theory or the great man interpretation of history, but let's just put it this way: without Washington's leadership, the revolution is not successful." And Annette Gordon-Reed says he's the glue that holds it together. So let's look at him. He comes to us as opaque. Every school kid knows these things about wooden teeth or never telling a lie, chopping down a cherry tree, throwing a coin across the Rappahannock. All of which



are not true. He didn't know he's going to be on the dollar bill, on the quarter, that there'd be a big spiky monument to him in the national capital named for him. He didn't know how it was going to turn out. And that's the important thing. Good history is telling a story in which you think it may not turn out the way you know it did. He owns other human beings. He's deeply flawed. He is rash. He rides out on the battlefield in Kips Bay risking his life and therefore the entire success of the revolution. He does it again at Princeton. He does it again and stops a retreat at Monmouth. He makes really bad tactical errors. He escapes to fight another day. But he's also able to inspire people to fight. He picks subordinate talent that are better than him. He knows how to defer to congress. He knows how to convince people from Georgia and people from New Hampshire that they're not from different countries but they're Americans. And more than anything else, twice he gave up his power, resigning, in December of 1783, his military commission and then again after his two terms as president, giving it up and returning, as I think he would say,

to the highest office of the land, which is citizen.

You have made many great documentaries: The Civil War, Baseball, Jazz. I really love Thomas Jefferson (1997). It made me fall in love with Monticello and I took my wife and teenage children there a few years ago. And I loved Lewis & Clark (1997). Is there one documentary that you would most want to be recognised for?

No. I'm a father of four daughters and I'd be a lousy father if I did that. I know somebody who thinks each one of my films is my best and that makes me so happy. While I know that The Civil War and The Vietnam War, I hope this film, The US and the Holocaust (2022) and The Roosevelts will be the main things that people pay attention to, I do love my films on The Shakers (1984) and Brooklyn Bridge (1981). I love the fact that Australians have seen them and have written to me about them.

How do you think The American Revolution will be received? Is it harder to tell this story now given the polarisation in America?

There's a universality to the stories if you're willing to go into those kinds of complexities because we all recognise that even in the people closest to us. Particularly for Americans now, as we continually lament about divided times, to show them we are not as divided as the revolution. In all the majesty and complexity and contradiction and even controversy of the US, the biggest lesson I've learned is that there's no "them" – there's only "us". People are always trying to create a "them" and there's no "them".

You did break the pattern of doing only American-themed films with Leonardo da Vinci (2024). Is there anyone else or a subject outside the US that you are thinking of making a documentary about?

I've thought about Winston Churchill off and on for years and years. He does have an American mother – that would be the perfect excuse. But he's so complicated. A lot of the people who just love Churchill would be so up in arms about having to tell the whole story, particularly in Africa and Sudan, in the subcontinent, in addition to World War I, and then of course we know more his years in exile during the 1930s and his warnings about Adolf Hitler and then his spectacular determination during the first years of the second world war and helping to bring in the American allies. Leonardo was interesting. My daughter, who I

work with and have made films on Jackie Robinson (2016) and Muhammad Ali, and we're working on one on Reconstruction, said why couldn't we do that? We really enjoyed it. My daughter and son-in-law, who's the third person in this production team, David McMahon, and my two oldest grandchildren, got to spend a year in Florence. What can be bad about that? You could make an argument, and I've made it, that the one person of the last millennium, the most important person, is Leonardo da Vinci

because he's the greatest artist and the greatest scientist of his time. Franklin is that in the 18th century but not to the wide extent. His art, his writing, is nowhere near as spectacular as Leonardo's, and his scientific inquiries are nowhere near as broad. One could offer, legitimately, Goethe and Mozart and Bach and Shakespeare and Jefferson and Washington into that argument.

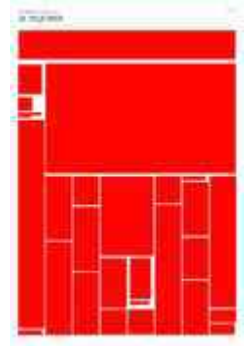
Can I say how excited I am to learn that you're doing a film on Lyndon Johnson. That is going to be great.

We've been working on it for many years: Lyndon Johnson and the Great Society. You might remember in our Vietnam series, we had a portrait of FDR, his hero, pulling out to Johnson when he arrived in the White House describing the domestic successes that he would have. That's it. The rest of the film is about the disaster of the foreign policy. So, we're going to reverse engineer that. Over the course of The Vietnam War, those guns are getting louder and beginning to affect and ultimately to degrade his ability to continue to pass this agenda. But he lights up page after page of history. He's endlessly fascinating and we've been recording interviews with people for almost 10 years now. People who knew him and people who are getting old and will probably not live to see the finished film but will be able to live and have a degree of immortality as the historian Bernard Bailyn, now passed at 101, makes a pretty impressive presence in The American Revolution.

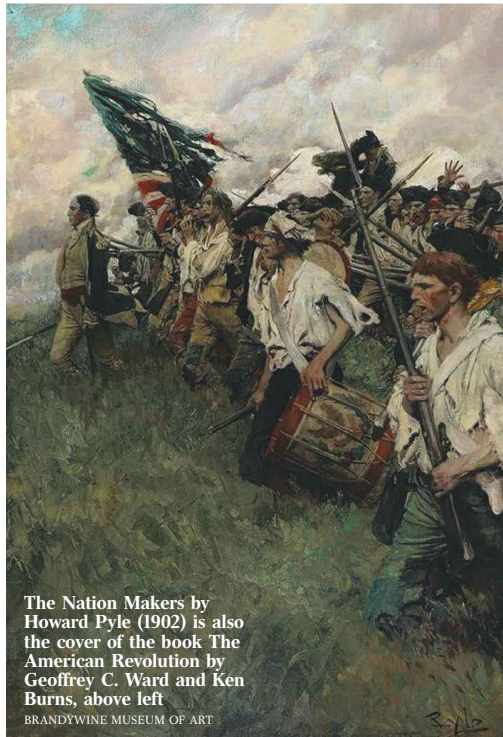
Well, Ken, thank you so much for this. It is great to talk to you again. A great honour for me.

It's my honour. I look forward to meeting you in person some day on your side of the world.

The American Revolution is screening on SBS from Sunday, December 7, at 8.30pm and on SBS On Demand. This interview has been edited.



Washington Crossing the Delaware by Emanuel Leutze (1851) documents George Washington's crossing of the Delaware River on the night of December 25-26, 1776, as part of a successful sneak attack at the Battle of Trenton during the American Revolutionary War
METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK
GETTY IMAGES



The Nation Makers by Howard Pyle (1902) is also the cover of the book The American Revolution by Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns, above left
BRANDYWINE MUSEUM OF ART

'This is a revolution of property men who want to make sure that their rights as property owners are respected ... and suddenly because of the Enlightenment, these break out into not just British rights but natural rights and transcendent liberties'

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