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>> I'm Matt Raymond from the Library of Congress. Each year, thousands of book-lovers of all ages visit the nation's capital to celebrate the joys of reading and lifelong literacy at the National Book Festival sponsored by the Library of Congress and hosted by First Lady Laura Bush. Now in its seventh year, this free event, held on the National Mall Saturday, September 29th will spark readers' passion for learning as they interact with the nation's bestselling authors, illustrators and poets. Even those not attending in person can access the event online. These prerecorded interviews with well-known authors are available through the National Book Festival website in podcast format. To visit, go to [www.LOC.gov/bookfest](http://www.LOC.gov/bookfest).

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We have the honor of talking with award-winning filmmaker Ken Burns, who needs no introduction to millions of people. He has directed, produced, and co-written more than 10 critically-acclaimed historical documentaries. His films include Brooklyn Bridge, The Civil War, Baseball, and Jazz, and have been recognized with Academy Award nominations, Emmy Awards, a Peabody Award and many others. His most recent film, The War, brings World War II to life through the personal accounts of those who experienced it directly. The seven-part series begins September 23rd on PBS. On September 29th, Mr. Burns will discuss the companion book, The War: An Intimate History, 1941 to 1945, which he co-authored with Geoffrey Ward at the National Book Festival. And welcome Mr. Burns, it is a pleasure to have you.

>> Thank you for having me.

>> Now, why do you feel it's important to participate in the National Book Festival?

>> Well, first of all, I think that the book is the greatest mechanical invention in the history of humankind. The book has transformed more lives more significantly than any other thing I can possibly imagine, so anything that increased an awareness of and use of books is great in my book. Despite the fact that I am a filmmaker, I think it all still begins, as we all know, with the word; and we do not make a significant series or film without also having accompanying it a book, which permits us to expand ideas and themes and stories that the abbreviated nature of film production does not always permit, and no more so than in this case of The War, in which my collaborator Geoffrey C. Ward produced a wonderful script for our film, but we had so much more information that we were able to put into this magnificent volume, and he was able to further expand and intertwine and inter-braid the myriad stories we tell of so-called ordinary people in our attempt to, at this last moment in their lives, tell a first-person story of what happened in the Second World War.

>> Now, if we could step back in time just a little bit to start out, many consider you -- and rightly so -- a pioneer; probably most notable

documentarian of our time. How did you become involved in the field in the first place?

>> Well, my father was a cultural anthropologist but also an amateur photographer. And if you think about that combination, it's not really too surprising that I would end up in something like a profession where I have been attempting, with photographs and motion pictures, to understand a kind of sense of how we -- that is to say, America -- works, what makes us tick. And I focus on history because I think history is the best way to understand where we've been in a kind of neutral position. I don't mean without emotion, but it's -- we are so dialectically preoccupied today with our own self-interests. We're divided by race and sex and geography and red state and blue state; and we can use history, our common and shared past, as a way to digest and understand not just what went on before but what's going on now and indeed where we want to go in the future. And I think that that is the great gift of history, and so I've spent my entire professional life since I graduated with college trying to come to terms with subjects in American history in a filmic way.

>> You are, if nothing else, a prolific documentarian and filmmaker. where do you find your continued inspiration?

>> Well, you know, people say, "How do you choose your subjects," and I say, "They choose me." I have been passionately in love with the story of my country's history. And I swear to you I wouldn't - if I were given a thousand years to live, I would not run out of projects in American history to do. So I am, you know, locked and loaded and ready to go. For the next 10 or 15 years, I've got projects stretching out ahead of me, I just don't have -- there's not enough time in the day to get to them. So, to me, it's -- the enthusiasm is built in. It's there at square one, and even when you involve yourself as we have with this subject, the war -- which I think is best we've done: the best film we've done and the best book we've done -- people always say, "Oh, how do you work on something for six and a half, seven years and not get bored?" And every day is, in fact, better than the previous day. As you get to know the people, as you get to know the stories, as you get to be -- I hope -- better as a filmmaker, better as a writer, you tell these things with a certain increasing passion, and boy, that helps you get up in the morning and it means that you don't sort of sigh a sigh of relief at the end of the day or Friday or lament the coming Monday morning. You're, you know, it's the other way around. You're sort of saddened that you have to let go of the work for a couple of days and very excited -- your pace quickens on Monday morning as you get a chance to dive back into it.

>> Let's talk a little bit about *The War: An Intimate History*, which goes on sale on September 11th. And in that book, you tell the story of World War II through firsthand accounts of citizens from four American towns. How do you feel this approach makes the war more real for this generation of Americans?

>> Well, as you know, each year there are dozens and dozens of documentaries and hundreds and hundreds of books that are published on the Second World War attempting to revisit those incredibly important

days. And yet we noticed over the course of the last couple of decades that too many of these things are burdened by an aerial view that doesn't permit an intimacy of storytelling, or, if they are in fact intimate -- and they are many wonderful things -- they don't provide the context that permit us to understand the larger picture. We attempted in both film and book to tell the story of the Second World War at both a macroscopic and a microscopic -- wanted to clear the brush of the stuff that usually distracts people in both film and books, which is an overweening interest in strategy and tactics, celebrity generals and politicians, weapons and armaments, and all things Nazi. We were interested in finding out a central question: what was it like to be in that war? What was the experience of combat? We did it from an American perspective, and to further limit it -- because, of course, no view of the Second World War can ever be complete -- but to get a symbolic and representative sense of what the whole war was like, we focused on the experiences of people, most of whom come from four geographically distributed American towns, and therefore, representative American towns: Waterbury, Connecticut; Mobile, Alabama; Sacramento, California; and Luverne, Minnesota. We went to these towns, we spent years there digging through the archives, interviewing people, getting to know the folks there, getting to know the movie palaces where the people who stayed back home would get the horrible news. We focused on some of those people who worked and worried and grieved in the face of this struggle, but most of all followed our friends off to war: not the good war of our subsequent mythologizing, but of course the worst war ever, responsible for nearly -- the deaths of nearly 60 million human beings, and got inside under the skin of that war in both the film and the book. That permits us to bring back a very documentary, experiential sense of what the war was like on a human level, on a kind of molecular level with regards to the country, and at the same time be able to pull up now and then and rise and get to understand that these two guys that have just landed at Omaha Beach are, of course, standing in for all the guys who landed at Omaha Beach, and this is the reason why we're there and this is the consequence of what happened, and we think it's -- you know, we show the European and the Pacific and the home front simultaneously. We don't just spend episodes in one place or the other. So it is, sort of, temporally and geographically unified in a way that I'd never seen in any other book or film, and that's exciting. And the people we've shared it with -- veterans, all the way down to, you know, teenagers -- are sort of stunned by the power of it in both film, written form, and of course in the film itself.

>> You mentioned that there have been hundreds of other accounts of World War II, obviously, maybe thousands. Your works have been known to impact not just individual viewers and readers, but really to impact the broader culture. What do you hope the impact of The War will be, both on viewers and readers and maybe a wider impact?

>> Well, you know, you're exactly right. We don't set out with any kind of agenda; we set out wanting to make the best film, the best book that's ever been made. Everybody should be doing that. That should be the ambition: to at least aim for a perfection which is unattainable but at least you've got to try. Yes, we very much want to get into the business of sponsoring people to think more about the Second World War, to read

more about the Second World War -- not just our books but other books -- to join in a conversation about the nature of war, about why we go to war. And because we've given a sense of the reality of that war, we hope that it will give people pause, that when we do go to war, we'll make the right decision about that. This is not advocating a particular political point of view: just reality. Our Civil War series came out a month and a half after Saddam Hussein had invaded Kuwait, and Americans in that month and a half period had gotten very excited about going in to war; something like 85 or 90 percent of the American public were so gung-ho to go to war, and then at the end of September, 1990, our film came out and that enthusiasm was checked. Now, I'm making no comment on the nature of that war; I'm just saying it's always good to not be enthusiastic about war, because we tend to abstract it, we tend to romanticize it, and particularly in the case of the Second World War, the farther away we get from it, in a paradoxical way the more bloodless it becomes, and we wanted to unwrap that bloodless gallantness, to uncloak that stuff that it tends to smother the reality of the war, and to show people what it's like. So I hope that everyone who sees it will not only engage in a common conversation -- which is always a wonderful thing for a country to do -- about the nature of this war and of all wars, to read more, to look at other things, and to join in the discussion. Our first episode is called A Necessary War. It was -- comes from a combat -- a comment one of our soldiers said that we interviewed well before we invaded Iraq; indeed, I think it was just after 9/11 -- he said, "There are no good wars; there are only necessary wars and perhaps just wars." And I hope that it just permits Americans to ensure that the next time we do go to war, it will be for necessary and just causes.

>> As you know, the Library of Congress shares your goal of telling more of the stories of veterans, in particular, through the Veterans History Project, and we appreciate your support of that. As you have gone through and told these stories of World War II, what has affected you the most?

>> Well, I think it has been the accumulated awareness of the power of these so-called ordinary lives. You know, we tend to focus, as I said before, when we're dealing with wars on the celebrity generals and politicians. And I think we do so at our own disadvantage, because the people who do the actual fighting and dying in war are more often than not the so-called ordinary people who come from the various corners of our country, and in the case of the Second World War, we're not interested in empire or conquest or riches or whatever, but we're fighting -- willing to sacrifice their own lives for an idea. And I think that, as you work in the editing room and then at your typewriter, you're stunned, awed, at the notion that these 17, 18, 19 years old, or, you know, a period of my own life when I had the luxury of inattention and narcissistic self-involvement, they happened to have helped save the world and were willing at any moment to make peace with the fact that they might be dead the next moment. And that has an accumulated power -- and listen, these folks are not going to be around much longer. They're dying at a rate of 1,000 a day in America. And so in addition to making this film, in addition to making this book, in addition to encouraging the local PBS affiliates to produce their own films in this bottom-up fashion, we've partnered with the Library of Congress' Veterans History Project and are insisting that people go out and record their relatives -

- the great-grandpa, grandpa, grandma, great-grandma -- and find out what happened. Our kids think -- most of them, a lot of them -- think we fought with the Germans against the Russians in the Second World War, which is the exact opposite, but they've all got access to a DV camera, and if they go to [PBS.org/TheWar](http://PBS.org/TheWar) and download some simple writing and shooting instructions and some sample questions from us, they can participate in an incredibly satisfying, deeply rich investigation that not only will help their country -- a grateful republic will house these at the Library of Congress -- but they will be engaged in forging better and stronger connections within their own community and indeed within their own family. I mean, when you do that, you make yourself richer in the best sense of that word.

>> It's an old maxim that war brings out both the best and the worst in people. Do you agree with that? Have you found that?

>> I really do, and I think that's why we're drawn to it. It's obvious that in the drama of war we come in contact with the very worst of human beings -- depravity, brutality, murder, loss, catastrophe, death, flawed or all of these now cliched words that in some ways don't impact people -- but we also come in contact with the very best of human nature and we see amazing love and brotherhood as well as the obvious bravery and courage that wars often engender in various human beings. And I think for us, who have the luxury and the perspective of this distance -- in this case, of 60 plus years -- we are in awe of the way in which these various contradictory attributes sort of collide with one each other and bombard into one each other and produce in that collision just amazing things. I've never had a project that has been so powerful for me as a filmmaker and as a writer to be engaged in. I mean, this is a project we didn't want to let go. There was an appeal, an allure, that occurs -- strangely enough, paradoxically enough -- in all wars, and we're drawn to all of the lessons of the Second World War: about sacrifice, about reticence, about, you know, the fact that in shared sacrifice we made ourselves richer as a country. And that's something, I think, we could really be mindful of today.

>> Your award-winning documentary *The Civil War* has been described as, "the most successful public miniseries in American history." How does it compare with your new series *The War*?

>> Well, I actually think that this new one may be better, and, you know, I don't -- you know, it's like a father with some children, you love them all the same -- and my goodness, *The Civil War* is that emotional archeology that we are looking to do. We're not interested in excavating the dry dates and facts and events of the past but are interested in some higher emotional truths that we might touch upon or be able to grasp momentarily in the course of the film or the book. But here in *The War*, we're dealing with our fathers, and there we're dealing with our great-great-grandfathers. Here we're dealing with a mixture of still photographs -- to be sure, as *The Civil War* had -- but also footage in which we can sometimes be present through the art of sound effects and music and commentary and the extraordinary footage we were able to find at the Library of Congress and the National Archives and hundreds of other repositories literally around the world. So I think in some ways,

there is just an urgency, immediacy, and a power to investigating something in which, at the end of the day, you might be able to read this book or look at the film sitting next to somebody who was there -- and that, you know, was, of course, an actuarial impossibility with The Civil War, but is very possible here, and we're so looking forward to the kind of -- as you put it -- that national event that could take place as grandparents and even great-grandparents and children and grandchildren have an opportunity to sit down together and maybe share experiences that are at the center of how we are today, how we got here today: the luxuries, the difficulties, everything that we are configured from issue out of both the Civil War and, in the much more immediate sense, the Second World War.

>> Now, in The War we look forward to hearing, I think, extraordinary stories from ordinary people, but your work has also focused on some towering historical figures, including Jefferson, Lincoln, Jackie Robinson, Louis Armstrong and many others. Who among those that you have studied do you find most fascinating and compelling?

>> Well, it's very, very interesting. Someone asked me the other day, you know, "Who would you want to go have lunch with?" You know, or, "Who would you like to take a car, a road trip with?" And it's an impossible thing to answer because, of course, over the duration of my professional life I've gotten to "know" -- quotes around that -- literally dozens of amazing human beings. Mark Twain, my goodness Who wouldn't want to spend some time with the greatest writer we've ever had who knew how to put together words better than any of us? And you stand in awe and you shake your head that there has ever been a manipulator of the English language so gifted -- the American English language -- so gifted as Samuel Clemens writing under the penname of Mark Twain. I think, you know, I've had the privilege of seeing the courage of Jackie Robinson know how difficult it is to play the sport of baseball and to understand he had to excel at a game in which there were people interested in his extermination is an amazing testimony to courage. I've gotten to know the centrality of Louis Armstrong's art. But at the end of the day, I guess that you'd want to spend time with Abraham Lincoln, who may have gotten us better than we've gotten ourselves and themes to his words still resonate. I mean, it's so interesting that in the first anniversary of September 11th, besides that dreadful and, of course, moving recitation of the names of those who had fallen there, the only other human words that were uttered were the Gettysburg Address. And that the idea that a short two-minute speech written more than 100 years before that about a battle that had taken place in an entirely different kind of war could've contained within it the kind of poetry that would be necessary for us, to help us understand our own terribly moving and yet feeble attempts at memorial. That is a testament to an amazing human being, and I think a testament in the end to the power of words and why we're having this conversation: that we are able in our films and in our books to put together these words as Mark Twain did, as Abraham Lincoln did, as ordinary people do in their letters and journals and diaries and newspaper articles, that are able to not just address the situation they find us in but provide the rest of us -- their posterity -- with the ammunition to go forward, and what a glorious opportunity we have to just be the beneficiaries of the power those words have.

>> You talk about the power of words, but the moving image has also revolutionized the way people get information, and how stories are told visually can affect how strongly people perceive events. So do you feel an added responsibility as a documentarian because of that immediacy in your approach to how you do your documentaries?

>> Most certainly. I wouldn't even say it as an added responsibility; I just think that any artist has a responsibility to use the tools at his or her disposal honorably. This is an old 19th-century word that has long since fallen out of fashion, but it requires a certain discipline and self-sacrifice; yes, indeed. These images have the power, and we know the way in which propaganda manipulates that power, that it's incumbent upon the rest of us, who are not comfortable with the style of articulation that's described as propaganda, to be mindful of that power. We have some very disturbing images in our film. Very, very disturbing. Some of them have never been seen before. And yet we carefully calibrated our comfort level and, indeed, your comfort level in how we would mete those out, and we have descriptions, spoken descriptions of battle and war and the most intense and ferocious instances of combat that require a kind of responsibility in how you dole them out. It is easy to overkill -- no pun intended.

>> When one gets the chance to talk to someone who's been so masterful and successful in his craft as you, I really feel as if I should ask if you have advice for other documentarians, particularly young people, as they're approaching their work. Are there any pointers or tips or guidance that you can give people as they approach this?

>> Well, with regard to documentary filmmaking, the good news is also the bad news, and that is, there is no career path. If you want to become a doctor or a lawyer or, indeed, a feature filmmaker, there's an actual path that most everybody can follow. I've found that every documentary filmmaker -- most important, every successful documentary filmmaker -- has forged their own trail, and that can be incredibly difficult, incredibly lonely, and can dissuade even the most talented among us to abandon and seek another form of, you know, career, or whatever you want to call it. I think, within that, it's very important that you know yourself. You've got to have something to say. And I don't mean in the way of advocacy or politics; I just think you have to have that burning fire. And it is completely alright if you don't have it, you just have to be honest enough with oneself to know that it's not there and to walk away. My first semester film class I think had 35 people in it, and four years later, three of us graduated in Film Studies. That's an incredibly, sort of, merciless triage that took place there, but it was mostly people realizing, "I didn't have the fire in the belly." And once you understand that, "Yes, I have that fire in my belly," you have to persevere, because there is many more dollars -- many more filmmakers with good ideas than there are dollars to support those projects. And I have to imagine there's lots of really talented filmmakers that have just not been heard from because they didn't have that staying power to just overcome the inevitable disappointments and failures that occur along the way, and for many years I kept on my desk two three-ringed binders filled with literally hundreds of rejections from funders for my very first film --

which was History of the Building of the Brooklyn Bridge -- but I stuck with it. It was nominated for an Academy Award in the Best Feature Documentary category, and the rest is literally history. I just kept pushing through those obstacles and trying to continually rekindle that fire in the belly. And I feel as passionate today in 2007 as I did back in 1975 when I graduated from college and said, "This is what I want to do." And, in fact, probably more so.

>> Before we let you go, can you give us any hints about what's next for Ken Burns?

>> Absolutely, I've got -- I'm bursting at the seams to get a new project. Someone asked Duke Ellington what his most important composition was, and he said, "The one I'm working on now." We're halfway through editing a massive series on the history of the national parks -- not a travelogue, not a what inn or lodge to stay at, but a history of the ideas and the individuals that brought this to us, now obvious thing, national parks, alive, but it's a wholly American idea -- set-aside land for the privileges not of kings and noblemen but for everybody for all time. Wallace Stegner, the great author and historian, said it was America's best idea, and we're pursuing that idea -- whether it's the best or not -- with a great enthusiasm and vigor. We're doing something on Prohibition, we're going to try to update our baseball series, we have a massive series on Franklin Roosevelt that's in the works, and dozens of other projects that take too long to describe.

>> Well, the book is *The War: An Intimate History, 1941 to 1945*, in bookstores September 11th. And of course the series is *The War*, September 23rd -- begins September 23rd on PBS. Ken Burns, thank you so very much.

>> It's been my pleasure. Thanks for this conversation and for helping to spread the word.

>> And we look forward to hearing more from you at the National Book Festival on Saturday, September 29th, on the National Mall from 10 AM to 5 PM. It is free and open to the public. If you would like more details or a list of participating authors, including Ken Burns, visit [www.LOC.gov/bookfest](http://www.LOC.gov/bookfest). I'm Matt Raymond. Thank you for listening.

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