Introducing Ken Burns
Interviewer

Now, Ken grew up in New York and graduated from Hampshire College in 1975.Â Since then, heâ€™s devoted a long career to the art of making history come alive through the medium of film.Â And I have to say that our conversation at the table was stimulating; I wish you all couldâ€™ve heard it.Â But truly a magnificent career that has set the standard for documentary filmmaking, really around the world. Â

Interviewer

It would be hard to live in this country and not be familiar with Kenâ€™s work.Â Heâ€™s produced a long list of award-winning documentaries, with subjects as diverse as Thomas Jefferson, Susan B. Anthony, Huey Long, Mark Twain, Louis and Clark, the Statue of Liberty, and the Brooklyn Bridge.Â Heâ€™s probably best known for his epic documentaries thatâ€”on American history that playedâ€”or appeared on PBS.Â

Interviewer

The first was The Civil War, which premiered in 1990 to worldwide acclaim, and garnered multiple Emmy, Grammy, and Peabody awards.Â Other multi-part documentaries were Baseball, released in 1994; and Jazz, in 2001.Â Six years later, he produced another epic documentary called simply, The War.Â This seven-part film told the story of the Second World War through the personal accounts of average citizens from four American towns.Â His next major project, as we said earlier, will be a study of the Vietnam War. Â

Interviewer

Now, Ken, Iâ€™m very happy to say, is a longtime friend and supporter of the West Point Department of History.Â Â He has screened portions of his work for cadet audiences, and he serves on the Center for Oral History Board of Advisors.Â Â It took us about a nanosecond to decide who should be our guest speaker tonight; and weâ€™re delightedâ€”we were delighted when Ken graciously accepted our invitation.Â So Ken, thank you for being here, and ladies and gentlemen, I introduce to you now, Ken Burns.

â€œFrom the Bottom Upâ€: Oral Historyâ€™s Power
Ken Burns

Thank you, sir, thank you.Â My goodness, what a generous introduction.Â You know, I live in a tiny little village in New Hampshire; Iâ€™ve lived there and work there for the last 32 years, and I have on my refrigerator an old and now faded New Yorker cartoon that shows two men standing in hell, the flames licking up around them.Â And one guy says to the other, â€œApparently, my over 200 screen credits didnâ€™t mean a damn thing.â€ [Laughter]

Ken Burns

And of course, they donâ€™t. But I am so grateful, Colonel, for that generous introduction, and Iâ€™m also very, very happy to be back at West Point. I remember it was 25 years ago this past summer that I made my first trip here to film archives for our then-just sort of gleam-in-our-eye series on the history of the American Civil War. And we shot a lot of pictures of cadets here, and put out our scoop lights and our film cameras and worked in blistering heat in the archives for a day or two. And I remember that, and of course, more than anything, I am so grateful to be back here to participate in your extraordinarily happy

event of the grand opening of this Center for Oral History.

Ken Burns

And I remember also the collaboration we had with The War. We wanted to get it right, and there was only one place in the country where we knew we could go and get it right, and I look forward to pestering you over the next few years as we embark on that. Â Pestering you and your colleague particularly, Matt Moten, who was very helpful in The War, and everyone else I know thatâ€™s very anxious to help us get it right. So, weâ€™re very grateful.

Ken Burns

And Todd, Iâ€™m so thrilled about tonight and the opening of this extraordinary center.Â You know, as you can see, the real proof of oral history and its great power is in the clips you saw at dinner, and in what we saw before dinner.Â Thereâ€™s nothing better in terms of history than that, Todd, and I congratulate you for what youâ€™ve accomplished. Â I particularly want to say that Iâ€™m so happy to have the opportunity this evening to meet many of the veterans who appeared in the film, and I think I echo everyone in this room to thank you for your extraordinary courage once, in the service of your country, and then your willingness to speak about your experiencesâ€”not always a pleasant or an easy thing to do.Â

Ken Burns

I am deeply honored and delighted to have this opportunity to speak with you today to celebrate the special messages of the pastâ€”our common memory, our common heritage continually directs our way.Â Let us listen.Â Let us listen.Â Too often as a culture we have ignored this difficult but often joyful historical noise, becoming in the process blissfully ignorant of the power those past lives and stories and moments have over this moment, and indeed, our vast, unknown future.Â

Ken Burns

I am interested in that power of history, and I am interested in its many varied voices.Â Not just the voices of the old top-down version of our past, which would try to convince us that American history is only the story of great men, capital G, capital M. Â And certainly not just those pessimistic voices that have recently entered our studiesâ€”voices which seem to say that our history, our American history, is merely a catalog of white European crimes. Â

Ken Burns

We must be interested in listening to the voices of a true, honest, complicated past, that is unafraid of controversy and tragedy, but equally drawn to those stories and moments that suggest an abiding faith in the human spirit, and particularly the unique role this remarkable republic has played in the positive progress of mankind.Â That is, of course, at the heart of what weâ€™ve struggled to do over the last 35 years with our documentary filmsâ€”what this center will continue to do for a long timeâ€”is celebrate, in the best way possible, the bottom-up stories of this country.Â This is of educational value, not just to cadet and citizen, but as you can see tonight, to documentary filmmakers as well. Â That was an extraordinary film that you made.Â I look forward to seeing the second half, and just happy to share this evening with the extraordinary filmmakers here. Â

War Happens Inside a Man
Ken Burns

Listen: as World War II drew to a close in the spring of 1945, the CBS Radio correspondent Eric Sevareid was troubled. Heâ€™d been reporting on the fighting for four years nowâ€”had witnessed the fall of France, parachuted into the Burmese jungle, struggled to keep up with G.I.s as they battled their way toward Rome, and then across southern France. And he had done his best to convey to his listeners back home all that he saw and heard along his way. But he was haunted by a sense that he had failed. â€œOnly the soldier really lives the war,â€ he told his audience. â€œThe journalist does not. He may share the soldierâ€™s outward life and dangers, but he cannot share his inner life, because the same moral compulsion does not bear upon him. The observer knows he has alternatives of action. The solder knows he has none.â€

Ken Burns

But then he went on. â€œWar happens inside a man,â€ he said, â€œand that is why, in a certain sense, you and your sons from this war will be forever strangers.â€ Forever strangersâ€”but then he went on: â€œIf, by the miracle of art and genius, in later years, two or three among them can open their hearts, and the right words come out, then perhaps we shall know a little of what it was like, and we shall know then that all the present speakers and writers hardly touch the story.â€

Ken Burns

Our film series The War that Lance mentioned, the work that we have seen this evening, the fine work that this center will continue to do for decades to come, was createdâ€”is created in that spirit. And hope that we could, if only for a few moments, permit our husbands, fathers, and grandfathers to return to us no longer strangers, their inner storms, if only for a second, calmed by sharing with us their most honest recollections of war.
Â This is the genius of a bottom-up history.

Ken Burns

You know, for most of the life of our republic, the way we have formally told our history was from the top-down. And we have neglected the infinitely interesting stories of ordinary people, as they did the fighting and the dying in wars, as they did the living in almost every aspects of our life. And this is what the whole purpose, the whole science, the whole art of oral history is about: capturing these ephemeral moments, these fleeting experiences that donâ€™t make it into the textbooks, and find that, in fact, the textbooks are enriched by this kind of bottom-up view.

Ken Burns

As a nation, we collectively search our past continually for heroes, mentors, and guides, and trust in their example to lead us through the most difficult of times. So many different things threaten the fragile coalition, the invisible and sometimes unspoken compact that binds us all together. Â â€œThat the resources of the present seem inadequate,â€ as Abraham Lincoln said, â€œto our needs.â€ And we turn to those distant figures to help us comprehend the whole.

Ken Burns

Nowhere is the need for this advice greater, or the stakes higher, than when our country is facing the daunting specter of war, whether it is the Revolution that made us, or the devastating internal struggle of our Civil War, or the current actions in the Middle East. War sets our republic vibrating in often dangerous and unexpected and unintended ways. And we seek desperately to understand the mysterious, inscrutable, sometimes even

transcendent elements that force their way to the surface when human beings kill each other in great numberâ€”that is to say, when human beings go to war.

Ken Burns

It is not, ladies and gentlemen, enough to be against war. In a world where so much evil does exist, where human nature itself propels people into defensive postures and then aggressive action, there is no chance that wars will simply disappear just because we hope it will be so. Â Indeed, our own history shows us that warsâ€”some warsâ€”had to be fought. And still the contradictions and paradox of armed conflict confound us at every turn.

Realizing the Possibility to Share Interior Stories
Ken Burns

Our series on the Civil War that was broadcast 21 years ago this fall began with a quote from Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. He had been wounded six times during that conflict, and would go on to serve his country once more as a Justice of the Supreme Court. He said, â€œWe have shared the incommunicable experience of war. We have feltâ€”we still feelâ€”the passion of life at its top. In our youths, our hearts were touched with fire.â€ Holmes was struggling himself to put into words, performing a kind of oral history, a gift to the rest of us, what every soldier who has faced combat knows in his or her guts: that paradoxically, when your life is most threatened, when violent death is possible at any moment, everything is vivified. Â The intensity of experience, heightened to a level not felt in ordinary life. War creates a terrorâ€”an excruciating, unbearable terror, to be sureâ€”that is not only tragic and repellent, but understandably compelling, and sometimes, incredibly, for some, even attractive.

Ken Burns

It is an almost indescribable feeling that survivors of war from the beginning of human history have found overwhelming, intimidating, haunting, yet also seductive and spellbinding. We are compelled, and our pursuit of oral history permits us the possibility to tell that interior storyâ€”the story that has only been, for the most part, the work of fiction. We have the possibility now. We have the tools. We have the resources. We have the ability and the talent, clearly, to be able to go and ask those questions of survivors that Eric Sevareid so desperately hoped would come to the surfaceâ€”to ask them to come and speak to us about their experiences.

Ken Burns

If you had a chance to watch our series on the Second World War, called The War, you met 50 or so human beings who are forced to descend into the madness of global war, all of whom you will know by the end of the last episode, I hope, almost like family members. These will not be the traditional top-down heroes we are usually presented withâ€”the generals, presidents, and statesmen; prime ministers and field marshals, who tend to recede from our understanding, just as they ascend to that pantheon of Great Men, capital G, capital M.

Ken Burns

No, these are folks you might be having Thanksgiving with, later next monthâ€”men whose stories of war are just now being told. This is a film that we could not have made 15 years ago. They just werenâ€™t talking yet. And this is a film we will not be able to make in five or so years. It will be, as the accountants say, â€œan actuarial impossibility.â€ The Second World War will shortly become the province of historians, and no matter how good they

areâ€”and thereâ€™s lots of good historians out thenâ€”they will necessarily have to abstract things.

Ken Burns

But here, now, most of the people who narrate our account of the most complex conflict in human history come not from the Centers of population and power in the United States, but from four geographically distributed, essentially randomly-chosen, to some extent isolated, towns: Luverne, Minnesotaâ€”tiny Luverne, Minnesota; Sacramento, California; Waterbury, Connecticutâ€”just down the road, and Mobile, Alabama. Where our Civil War narrative had focused primarily on the main players, like Abraham Lincoln, while trying not to sacrifice an appreciation of what the privates were doing, the story of the Second World War, the work of this center, is different, told almost exclusively from the perspectives of those who did the actual fighting and dying, as well as those back home who waited for their loved ones to return. In short, if you werenâ€™t in combat on the front lines, you are not in our film.

Ken Burns

Through the eyes of our witnessesâ€”no Monday morning quarterback, no armchair historians dispensing safe, avuncular opinion, it is possible, I believe, in moments, to sense how our whole country got up in that now-distant war. These towns could, of course, be any four towns. How the nation reacted to the news of the attack, so much like 9/11â€”that Pearl Harbor momentâ€”the 9/11 moment sponsored in a lot of the people we interviewed a memory of Pearl Harbor that often permitted them to access memories and stories they put aside: how their sons were mobilized and sent off to war; how the progress of that war unfolded in newspapers, magazines, and at the Saturday afternoon movies, where the newsreels would be shown; what battles were like at street level, from the ground-up; how those who remained at home worked and worried and grieved in the face of the struggle; how innocent young men who had been turned into professional killers adjusted to a world without war; and how the four towns and its people were permanently transformed by the Second World War.

Ken Burns

By concentrating on the specific, we had hoped that we made it possible to better receive the universal, to comprehend the whole, because we are investedâ€”deeply and emotionally investedâ€”in the particular. This is the work of oral history. This is the only thing that provides us the real access to the past, the individual experiences that transcend that.

The Perpetual Motion Machine of History
Ken Burns

And if we had one deeply important understanding that came out of our series as we began to approach the bottom-up story of the Second World Warâ€”indeed, as we had tried to do years before in The Civil War with the diaries and the journals of soldiersâ€”we came to understand, watching these citizen-soldiers, watching these ordinary people, that there are no ordinary people. That we are all invested with a divinityâ€”that our individual experiences matter, particularly in this country.

Ken Burns

And when I watch what has been going on today, this evening, with you all, the extraordinary opportunity to just join, if only for a few moments, your extraordinary efforts,

Iâ€™m reminded of an amazing pursuit, a folly, many called it, in the 19th century, and before that, the 18th and 17th, where men of religion and men of science attempted to do what nobody else had been able to do. And that was create a perpetual-motion machine. Many people tried; some went insane, some died trying, and produced, of course, the damnedest contraptionsâ€”and none of them, of course, worked.

Ken Burns

But when we think about the extraordinary passion and dedication that this institution here, the United States Military Academy, doesâ€”when we think about the ideals that propel the young men and women who now come in the service of their countryâ€”we realize the perpetual-motion machine is our Constitution and the ideals behind us. And that what the imperatives of this Oral History Center, what, indeed, my work has been about, is try to capture, at its most fleeting moments, the power of those so-called ordinary lives; to reveal to us this magnificent perpetual-motion machine, which is, I hope, with his divine blessing, the United States of America. Thank you so much.Â [Clapping]

Generosity Drives the Center
Interviewer

As one of my classmates sitting at my table just said, â€œThatâ€™s going to be a hard act to follow.â€ [Laughter] Iâ€™m not even going to tryâ€”Ken, thank you so much for those compelling remarks, and to add my voice to several others tonight, thank you all for being here. But most importantly, thank you all for what you have done, and what you continue to do for West Point and for the Center for Oral History. I think from what little youâ€™ve seen so far tonight you see the real power of the Center, both as a tool for educating the Corps of Cadets, but also as an incredible way of telling the story of West Point and its graduates to the entire world, simply with the click of a mouse. Todd Brewster asked me allâ€”asked me to remind youâ€”apparently there was some question about thatâ€”that the web site is WestPointCOH.org. And as he said earlier, they are busy uploading a lot of interviews to it.

Interviewer

Now, my primary function here tonight is administrative. I think I have one administrative announcement, and that is that those of you that are going to participate in tomorrowâ€™s activities, if you are staying in the hotel, there will be a van or vans right out in front of the hotel. Â You should be on those by about 8:30 in the morning. They will take you up to the chapel for the organ recital. Those of you who are not staying in the hotelâ€”youâ€™re staying somewhere else, and youâ€™re going to participate tomorrowâ€”there will be transportation spotted for you in the parking lot, you know, across the street, just past after you go through the big security tent there. Did I get that right, Nicole?

Interviewer

Goodâ€”alright. As a fundraiserâ€”Iâ€™m Freed Lowery, by the wayâ€”Iâ€™m a major gifts fundraiser.Â I feel compelled to do my work here. As Lance mentioned at the beginning of the evening, the goal, of course, is to fully endow the Center for 11.5 million dollars. We struggled for the first couple of years. You know, timing is everything, and we started doing this just at the time the economy decided to go in the tank. But Iâ€™m really happy to say that weâ€™ve picked up a lot of traction in the last year or so. And we are a little under halfway now in terms of pledges towards that $11.5 million endowment.

Interviewer

[Clapping] Thereâ€™s a lot more ofâ€”thereâ€™s a lot more of Doug, Secretary White, and a lot of other guys in the classâ€”there are a lot of good stories to comeâ€”but thank you all for being hereâ€”Lance, thank you for a job well done. [Clapping]

Interviewer
None of this would be possibleâ€”the Center would not existâ€”if it were not for private donations, private gifts. Weâ€™ve got a long way to go. Weâ€™ve got a lot of work ahead of us. So continue to be generous. Convince your friends that they should be generous, because this is really everybodyâ€™s story, and it deserves to be told. Now, those of you who can stay up past the witching hour, we are going to show the second half of the film as soon as I shut up and get out of the way. I would encourage all of you to go up there, because thereâ€™s a lot of good stuff to come. Thereâ€™s a lot more of Doug Pringle. [Laughter]