

Burns' war documentary to include Latinos

by John Wilkens

SAN DIEGO - After two months of protest spearheaded in part by a longtime San Diego activist, PBS announced Wednesday that filmmaker Ken Burns' upcoming seven-part documentary on World War II will be amended to include Latinos.

Sort of.

PBS said new content will be "incorporated within the footprint of the series without changing the existing film." How exactly that will be accomplished - presumably segments between chapters - remains to be determined.

Burns also said he will use a Latino producer to help create the additional material, which in turn will become "an integral part" of DVD, Internet and classroom presentations related to the film.

"We are extremely pleased that such a positive solution has been found to address the concerns of the Latino community," Burns said in a written statement.

BURNS - Gus Chavez, a retired SDSU administrator, is 'elated' that Ken Burns' documentary 'The War' will include the Latino perspective. Photo by Nadia Borowski Scott.

The news was welcomed by organizers of "Defend the Honor," a campaign launched in February to push for changes in "The War," which was finished last fall and is scheduled to air nationally, in seven parts over two weeks, beginning Sept. 23.

"I'm just elated," said campaign leader Gus Chavez, a retired San Diego State University administrator. "Honoring Latino veterans is the right thing to do."

Another organizer, Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, a University of Texas journalism professor, called the announcement "incredibly positive" and said she looks forward to more details.

"Usually when we complain about being excluded, we are not heard," she said. "This time, they listened."

Burns, whose distinctive documentaries on jazz, baseball and the Civil War have generated both acclaim and controversy, worked on "The War" with co-director Lynn Novick for six years.

He has described it as an intimate look at "the greatest cataclysm in human history," told chiefly through the personal accounts of more than 40 men and women from four "ordinary" American towns: Sacramento; Waterbury, Conn.; Mobile, Ala.; and Luverne, Minn.

Late last year, Burns began touring the country to show excerpts from the 14-hour film to veterans. Word spread that the Latino experience, both in combat and at home, was not represented.

Chavez, Rivas-Rodriguez and several other activists flew to Virginia in early March for a meeting with Paula Kerger, president of PBS. They asked that the film be re-edited, calling it "shameful" to exclude the estimated 500,000 Latinos who served during the war.

Burns resisted. He said he's a filmmaker, not a historian, and that the series was never meant to be definitive. The focus instead was on the "universal human experience" of a war that "touched the lives of every family on every street in every town in America," he said.

PBS, supported in part by tax dollars, found itself walking a tightrope, trying to protect the artistic vision of a big star while addressing mounting criticism from influential groups such as the Congressional Hispanic Caucus and the National Council of La Raza.

In the end, according to PBS, it was Burns' decision to leave his film intact while creating "additional content" that will focus on the stories of both Latino and American Indian veterans. Kerger told the Associated Press she would not have forced him to make changes.

Rivas-Rodriguez said "Defend the Honor" organizers hope to meet soon with Kerger to get more information about how the new segments will be incorporated into the series. "The devil is in the details," said Marta Garcia of the National Hispanic Media Coalition.

"The protest was something that had to be done," Chavez said. "The Latino community came together, and PBS and Ken Burns recognized that our criticism was valid."

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