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February 25, 2007

Ms. Paula Kerger
PBS President and Chief Executive Officer
PBS Office of the Corporate Secretary
2100 Crystal Drive
Arlington, Va. 22202-3785

Dear Ms. Kerger:

It has come to my attention that PBS is sponsoring and planning to air Ken Burns' "The War," a seven episode and 14 hour film, scheduled for broadcast beginning on September 23, 2007. The impact of this ambitious documentary would be immense.

I have not had the opportunity to see any of film yet, but I understand that Burns completely left out the participation and contributions of African Americans, Asian Americans, Mexican Americans, and Native Americans. To be honest, I am disturbed by these omissions. How could, I ask, Burns have overlooked so many significant historical facts such as that:

One million African Americans and half a million Mexican Americans served in the U.S. Armed Forces during W.W. II?

The African-American 761st Tank Battalion distinguished itself in the Battle of the Bulge as "spearheads" for General George S. Patton's renowned Third Army?

Tuskegee pilots fought for freedom not only in Europe but also in America?

The Navajo Code-Talkers transmitted battle messages in the Navajo language that baffled the Japanese military and were instrumental in winning Pacific island battles from Guadalcanal to Iwo Jima to Okinawa?

Japanese Americans imprisoned in internment camps enlisted and served valiantly in the 442 Infantry Battalion, the most highly decorated unit in the history of the U.S. Army?

200,000 Mexicans were brought here as "braceros" to work in agriculture, considered a war industry?

The tens of thousands of African Americans, Asian Americans, Mexican Americans, and Native Americans worked on the assembly lines of the “Arsenal for Democracy”?

For America’s minorities, World War II was a battleground on two fronts – a fight against fascism abroad as well as a fight for equality at home?

If my information about the PBS documentary is correct, what Burns has done is to reflect and reinforce the Master Narrative of American history – the pervasive and popular story that our country was settled by European immigrants and that Americans are white or European in ancestry. Even when innocent or non-intentional, the Master Narrative’s omission of minorities is not only inaccurate but also injurious, for it presents a narrow and exclusive definition of who is an American.

Studied more inclusively and hence more accurately, our history reveals the truth that America has been and remains a nation peopled by the world. In the twenty-first century, our racial and ethnic diversity has been robustly expanding and sharply inclining. Already in California, whites have become a minority, and what has happened in the Golden State will happen to the total U.S. population within fifty years. Demography is demanding that we re-think the way we think about the past.

As a publicly-financed culture-making institution, PBS has an acute responsibility to make certain that it does not reproduce the Master Narrative in any of its programs. Inadvertant omission of minorities is no excuse. The unintended negative consequences of Burns’ monumental documentary on “The War” would be widespread and long lasting.

For your information, enclosed is a copy of my book, *Double Victory: A Multicultural History of America in World War II* (New York: Little, Brown, 2000).

I look forward to your response. Please feel free to contact me, if you have any questions. Email: rtakaki@berkeley.edu.

In conclusion, during World War II, millions of Americans of color participated as soldiers and workers in the defense of their country, and scores of thousands of them gave their limbs and lives fighting to ensure that our government “of the people, by the people, for the people” did “not perish from the earth.” They deserve the dignity of being remembered in any history of that war.

Yours truly,

Ronald Takaki,
Professor