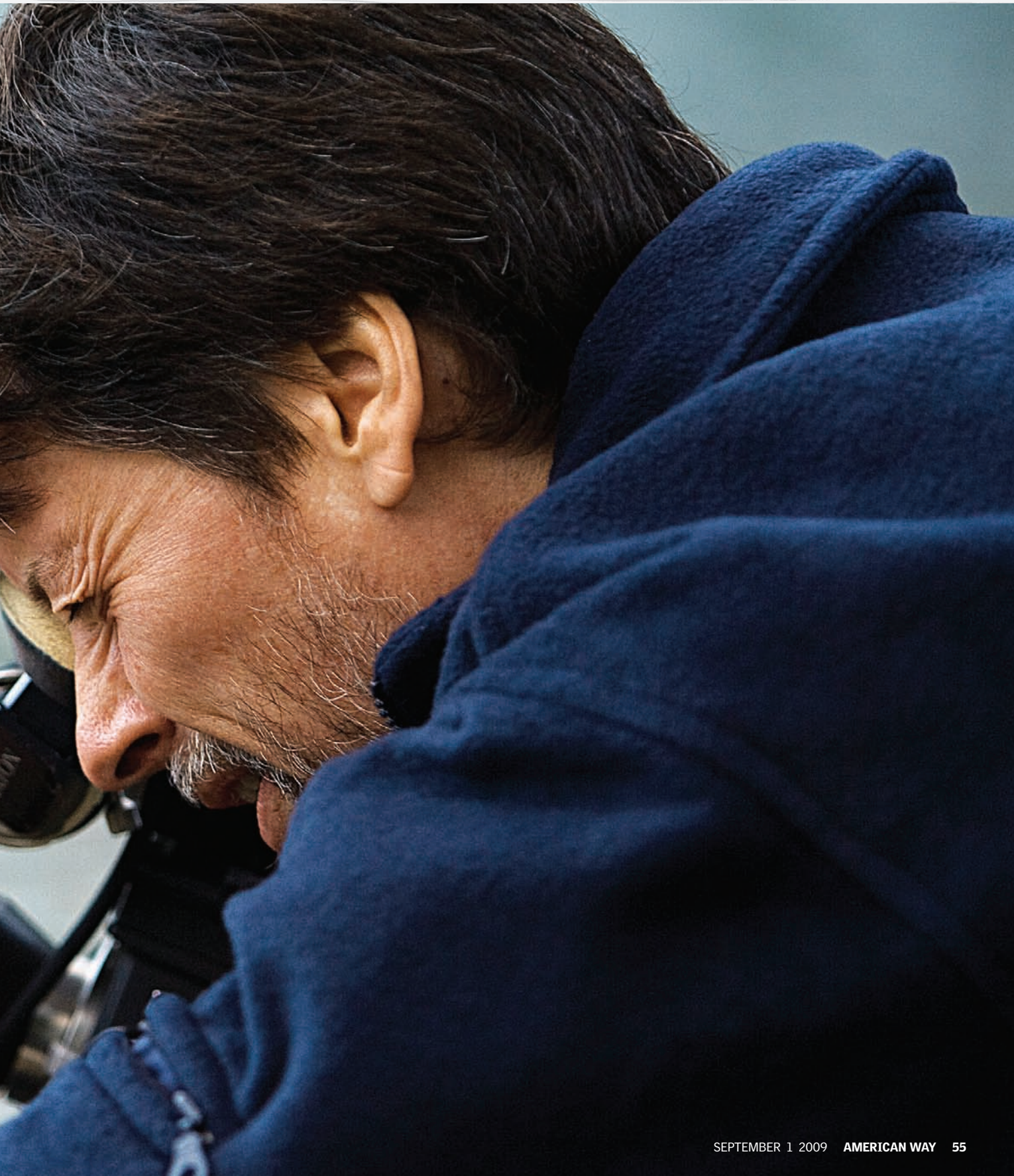
An * Runs Through It

Documentary filmmaker KEN BURNS doesn't rewrite history. He brings the past to life.

BY **KEVIN RAUB**



It's a loaded question, but pause for a moment and think about it: What is America's best idea ever? It's a polemical query, the answer to which is defined in generational terms. "The iPod!" says your 12-year-old. "The Internet!" says Generation X. "The elevator!" your grandfather might say. "The movie projector! Or the phonograph!" says Thomas Edison from the grave. A lot of life-changing ideas have come from within the shores of the United States, but at least two people think that none of the aforementioned things are America's best ideas. One of those people is Pulitzer Prize–winning author Wallace Stegner, whom you likely haven't heard of, but the other is documentary filmmaker Ken Burns, whom you surely have heard of.

Burns sees eye-to-eye with Stegner, who once wrote that America's best idea is the concept of preserving broad swaths of pristine landscapes — fit for postcards and fenced off from development — that we, as Americans, collectively own, care for, and enjoy, ideally for years and years to come. In other words, the concept of national parks. "They reflect us at our best rather than our worst," Stegner says. The fact that this idea of preserving land for the people, by the people came from an American hypothesis at all is news to many, but indeed the first national park in the world was Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming. It was established by an act of Congress that removed the land from public auction, and it was then put into law by the stroke of President Ulysses S. Grant's pen in 1872.

Today, there are 58 national parks under the domain of the National Park Service, the federal arm created in 1916 to oversee the parks. Burns is putting together a mammoth six-part, 12-hour documentary series that, if his past work is any indication, promises to be the definitive word on the subject. It will offer resounding support to Stegner's claim while bringing a tear-jerking, much-needed hint of patriotism to the American viewing public in the process. Fiercely ethnocentric, heartstrings inspirational, national-address engaging, and extraordinarily comprehensive, *The National Parks: America's Best Idea* is quintessential Burns.

"There has been lots of stuff done on national parks," Burns says from inside a gorgeous lodge on the shores of Swiftcurrent Lake in Montana's Glacier National Park, "but they have been travelogues — where to stay, flora and fauna. This is a more complicated human drama. We want to tell you about the ideas and individuals [who] made these national parks happen. That for the first time in human history — and it happened to happen in our country — people decided to set aside land not for the privileges of kings, noblemen, or the rich but for everybody for all time. Sounds sort of obvious now, but it wasn't."

And with that, Burns is off and running for his next heroic docudrama, the latest volume in his nearly 30-year career, which is sizing up not unlike that 32-volume *Encyclopædia Britannica* set in your childhood home that stood as the go-to source for everything when you were young. Since his Academy Award–nominated 1981 documentary *Brooklyn Bridge*, Burns has spearheaded an unparalleled collection of historical documentaries that reshape the way we view our history, hours and hours at a time.

He took on *The Civil War* in 1990 (which is now the highest-rated series in the history of American Public Television), *Baseball* in 1994 (now the most-watched series in PBS's history), and *Jazz* in 2001. Infused in between were epic digs into the lives of Thomas Jefferson, Mark Twain, Frank Lloyd Wright, Jackie Robinson, and Lewis and Clark, among others. In 2007, World War II got the treatment. Simply titled *The War*, the film was a comprehensive tale of conflict told through personal accounts of some 40 men and women from four prototypical American towns.

Burns's historical documentaries have been compared to Mozart symphonies and probably could all but replace textbooks in American-history classrooms. Yet on this path to becoming the most important documentary filmmaker in the history of the medium, Burns hasn't rewritten history even once but rather has put a fresh coat of paint on America's past, telling its riveting story along the way with Jackson Pollock–ian strokes of random narrative beauty otherwise lost in the grand scheme of our collective historical brushstrokes. His art, however, owes its roots to a much deeper and more personal place than historical fascination.

"My mother had cancer my whole life and died when

Tourists overlooking Yosemite Valley, circa 1902

Arches National Park

I was 11 — I don't even remember a moment when she wasn't just sick but *dying*," Burns recalls. "It set an incredibly difficult and tragic tone for our family. After she died, my father set a very strict curfew for my younger brother and me, but he always forgave it if a good movie was on TV or at the cinema guild. I remember staying up until two a.m. watching old movies on a school night, and it was the first time I ever saw my dad cry. He didn't even cry at my mother's funeral, but he cried at movies, and I began to understand their power."

But the power of film comes much easier on the side of fiction, on Hollywood blockbusters that weave elaborate tales of shock and intrigue and love and loss through high-tech special-effects machines. These films spit out an escape from everyday life like a bottle of whiskey and a perfect sunset do. But everyday life is precisely where Burns excels — in the nonfiction ring, where, when retelling the past, there are no surprise endings, no previously unknown shocking betrayals, no twists of fate. But Burns takes what we think we already know and spins it into something we don't, captivating us along the way like no reality show ever could. It's a maudlin tale for Burns himself, but he credits his mother's death as his seminal inspiration.

"I realized in my early 40s that in some ways, I had never truly put my mother to rest," he says. "I was magically keeping her alive in my imagination. When I had birthday cakes as a young boy, there was only one wish, an impossible wish. I confided this to a friend, [who then] said, 'What do you think you do for a living? You wake the dead. You make Jackie Robinson and Abraham Lincoln and Louis Armstrong come alive — who do you think you are really trying to wake up?' It's sort of dime-store psychology, but good history is waking the dead. Good history means even though you know how it turns out, you sit on the edge of your seat thinking that this time it will be different — that when Lincoln goes to Ford's Theatre, it's not going to turn out the way it did, or maybe that Lewis and Clark won't get back safely. In the case of history, if you tell a story well, people's attention is riveted on whether it turns out like they know it did. That's part of the mystery of bringing the past alive."

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Though Burns tends to create very serious films about very serious (always American) subjects, he is anything

but serious in real life. He is nothing like what you may imagine a historian to be: perhaps a stiff professor type? Or a recluse of scholastic proportions? He's actually one heck of a personable and funny guy, in love with life the way only a 55-year-old father of a toddler can be. "It's a badge of courage," he says of three-year-old Olivia, a product of his second marriage and the bookend of an 18-year gap between his children. "I'm changing diapers again. It keeps me young."

Burns says things like, "What's up, sister?" to his wife, Julia, and cries out "Rental!" when we smack a pothole while driving in Glacier National Park. He uses an iPhone, and Apple has even named an editing effect after him in its popular iMovie software. When he mock-relieves himself on a fire hydrant near Swiftcurrent Lake, his longtime collaborator and coproducer Dayton Duncan calls him "shameless." In short, Burns is one of the boys, thoroughly humbled by his place in this world. When his fans recognize him (and yes, he is routinely recognized as a celebrity), he gives them all the time they need. "If they know who I am, it means they have watched 18 and a half hours of *Baseball*, 15 hours of *The War*, 19 hours of *Jazz* — it's not like they are reading about me in *People* magazine. I can give them all the time they want."

Burns's favorite holiday is the Fourth of July. He reads the Declaration of Independence to his children, whereas you and I got *Little Red Riding Hood* and the *Three Little Pigs*. He even honeymooned in Yellowstone. In the end, though, all of that makes sense — Burns is an all-American guy attempting to chronicle all of America. On tap after *The National Parks* are documentaries on Prohibition, Vietnam, and the Dust Bowl, dual biographies of Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin D. Roosevelt, and a sequel to *Baseball* that's tentatively titled *The 10th Inning*, among others. On all of them, Burns will wear several hats: writer, editor, music supervisor, cinematographer, director, and producer. *Daunting* is the only word that comes to mind, but Burns sees it otherwise.

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"It may be naive foolishness on my part that doesn't appreciate how incredibly complicated these projects will be, but I'm drawn to it. And [as] that initial ignorance and enthusiasm for getting to know the subject takes over, and as its complexity develops, I'm humbled by what's going on, and I want to learn more and more," he says. "By the end, I realize how little I knew before. So, instead of me telling what I know already, I share with the audience a process of discovery."

All of this begs an obvious question:

What are the criteria for a subject to be Burns-worthy? After all, his catalog of work is extensive and impressive, but there are more topics than several lifetimes could cover (Thomas Edison, Muhammad Ali, apple pie, etc). How to pick? "Someone asked me once how I choose a subject, but I would turn it around and say that my subjects choose me," he says. "I think what we are is not historians interested in the dry dates and facts of the past but emotional archaeologists. For me, the ultimate decision of whether or not to go with a project is that it's begun to stir me in my heart as much as it's stimulated my mind because of the themes that are engaged in American history. In the end, it's always about feeling."

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"This is God's country," Burns says out loud to nobody in particular as we drive home through Glacier National Park one evening. It's not a religious statement but rather a shock-and-awe observation. The landscapes here are indeed majestic. But change is on the horizon, as the park once boasted some 150 glaciers but now manages to freeze only 25. Though *The National Parks* never approaches present day in its narrative, it's impossible to ignore the film's timing in this age of heightened awareness of environmental concerns and global warming.

All of Burns's films tap into a sense of American pride, beginning with his own and then extending far and wide into that of his television audience. As the U.S. national parks belong to all Americans collectively, it would be remiss not to think that Burns is banking on this collective ownership to blow wind on the preservation embers. With viewership for each of his films routinely clocking in at 40 million or more (not to mention the number of people who catch it later via reruns or DVD), he's making no small dent in the American consciousness.

"The mountains will be here," Burns says of Glacier National Park, just one of the film's many focal points. "They are spectacular. The lakes will be here. They are spectacular. But the glaciers are disappearing. God forbid we can't call this Glacier National Park anymore but Asterisk National Park because there aren't any." AW

KEVIN RAUB is a travel and entertainment journalist. His work appears regularly in *Travel + Leisure, Town & Country, Lonely Planet,* and *Organic Spa,* among other publications. His favorite national park is Hawaii Volcanoes National Park.