

# Advertisers won't salute Viet 'Letters'

By LARRY JAFFEE

NEW YORK — National advertisers shied away almost unanimously from buying spots on the Memorial Day syndication of "Dear America: Letters Home From Vietnam," the program's distributor says.

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## Vietnam

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The Emmy-winning documentary, originally produced by HBO in 1988, has been cleared in 110 markets covering 90% of the country. A feature-length film, it features Robert De Niro, Michael J. Fox, Kathleen Turner, Willem Dafoe, Martin Sheen and Sean Penn reading letters from soldiers to relatives and friends while combat footage screens.

In the case of "Dear America," advertisers were concerned with "the negativity that Vietnam conjures up by Americans," said Karl Kuechenmeister, senior vp media sales for Warner Bros. Domestic Television Distribution. He added that Warners was "very disappointed that corporate America wouldn't want to pay tribute to Vietnam veterans" by supporting the program, the first time it is being presented on free television.

Kuechenmeister declined to identify the balking advertisers, saying he didn't want to alienate companies to which he has to sell in the future.

Only six advertisers signed up for national spots: Pfizer, Smith Kline/Beecham, HBO, Warner Motion Pictures, Warner Home Video and Time-Life Direct Mail. (Only the first two are non-Time Warner companies.) Stations received half of the available spots to sell locally in a

barter arrangement.

Not quite a case of life imitating art, the advertiser snub comes on the heels of a recent "thirtysomething" episode in which a conservative advertiser demanded that an actor be removed from a commercial for demonstrating against the Persian Gulf war.

Warners spokesman Richard Klein noted that the commercial time was reduced from 12 minutes per hour to 12 minutes per two hours for dramatic effect, but wasn't aware whether the lack of national advertisers also played a role in the spot reduction.

"'Dear America' is a very anti-war film," said Bill Couturie, the film's San Francisco-based producer-director, who in 1982 made for ABC "Vietnam Requiem," which won two Emmys. "It's going against the grain, the mood of the country. I'm horrified by the pro-war fever that's sweeping the country."

Arnie Semsy, BBDO executive vp, said his ad agency "looked at the show (for all its clients) in the context of all syndicated shows, ratings potential, programming content and budget considerations," and felt it was a good buy for his clients, one of which is HBO. He added that he didn't come across any specific client objection to the show because of the Vietnam content.

"'Memorial Day was probably the

right time frame for that show, but viewing levels are down and most of our commitments had already been made for that time of the year," said Semsy.

Although the sell was male-oriented, Jerry Solomon, vp and general manager of Busch Media Group, which buys advertising for Anheuser-Busch beer brands, said he was unaware of "Dear America's" availability.

For the Memorial Day presentation, Warners commissioned Couturie to make a 19½-minute "post-script" called "Memorial: Letters From American Soldiers," which extends the themes of "Dear America" to all American-fought wars, up to the conflict in the Persian Gulf.

The companion piece says that "war is an awful, terrible horrific experience whether you win or lose," said Couturie, who was asked by HBO to make a "war heroes from Vietnam" movie.

"'Rambo' fever was sweeping the country. I told HBO that was not the way I viewed the war," said the filmmaker, who did think it was possible to portray soldiers sympathetically within an anti-war context. Months later in 1985, Couturie came across the book "Dear America," and he thought to himself, "here's a way to tell a story that hadn't been done before."

Profits relating to the distribution of the film will be donated by Time Warner to two non-profit organizations, Vietnam Veterans Ensemble Theatre Company and the New York Vietnam Veterans Memorial Commission.

## Blockbuster

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earnings per share of 50 cents to 60 cents. In 1990, the company reported net income of 68,654,000, or 68 cents a share. In March, the company had a 2-for-1 stock split that adjusted earnings to 42 cents a share.

Huizenga also lashed out again at recent reports of pay-per-view developments that some have said could threaten the video business. He said that the company has hired two technology consultants and that, based on their analysis and Blockbuster's own review, "we don't believe there's a threat."

Huizenga added that he thinks the threat is additionally muted by the fact that Hollywood releases movies for distribution to the home video industry months before the pay-per-view or cable stations receive them.

In response to another shareholder question on his plans to remain at Blockbuster if he is successful in his bid to win a Major League Baseball expansion team in South Florida, Huizenga said, "I'll continue on as CEO of Blockbuster until somebody throws me out of here."