

Robert Kerrey and the bloody legacy of Vietnam

By Patrick Martin and David North
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Former US Senator Robert Kerrey, newly inaugurated as the president of the New School University, one of the most prestigious positions in American academia, has admitted participating in a death squad attack on a Vietnamese village 32 years ago, in which he and six soldiers under his command killed 21 women, children and elderly men.

Kerrey held a press conference April 26 in New York City, after the text of an upcoming article in the *New York Times* magazine was made public and widely distributed over the Internet. The article, written by Gregory Vistica, became the cover story of the April 29 issue of the magazine. The issue was explored as well in the *Sixty Minutes II* program broadcast on CBS television the night of May 1. CBS and the *Times* jointly backed the investigation, which Vistica initially began for *Newsweek* magazine in 1998.

There is little dispute about the main lines of the events of February 25, 1969 in the tiny Mekong Delta hamlet of Thanh Phong. Kerrey's seven-man unit of Navy SEALs entered Thanh Phong for the purpose of murdering the mayor of the village, who was targeted by the US command because he was believed to be an active supporter of the National Liberation Front ("Viet Cong"). The village was in the heart of an NLF-controlled region where neither US forces nor those of the Saigon puppet government normally ventured except in daylight and in overwhelming force.

In the course of the nighttime assault, the American raiders killed every Vietnamese they encountered—men, women, children. They used every weapon in their arsenal, from knives to rifles and grenades to light anti-tank weapons, expending more than 1,200 rounds of ammunition on a village where only a few dozen people lived.

The after-action report filed by Kerrey and rubber-stamped by his superiors listed the results of the raid as "21 VC KIA" (21 Viet Cong killed in action). There was no mention of women and children killed, although Kerrey and all other members of the unit saw the bodies of at least 14, including several babies. The 21 bodies were added to the official US count which supposedly demonstrated the progress being made in the war. Kerrey subsequently received a Bronze Star for his conduct in Thanh Phong—a month before a second raid in which he was severely wounded, losing part of his leg, and eventually receiving the Congressional Medal of Honor.

What happened in Thanh Phong?

There are a few significant differences between the recollections of Gerhard Klann, the former SEAL and participant in the raid who was the main source for Vistica's report, and the account given by Kerrey.

* Kerrey says the killings took place at long distance and were unintentional. Klann says that the women and children were rounded up after the unit took control of the village and deliberately massacred at point-blank range.

* Kerrey says the SEALs were fired on and then responded. Klann says there was no hostile fire whatsoever.

* Kerrey says the unit was unfamiliar with the village and initially thought it had been abandoned. Klann says that the SEALs had

conducted a previous raid on Thanh Phong two weeks before and knew that women and children were living there. (On this last issue, military documents vindicate Klann.)

The preponderance of the evidence supports Klann's account—not least the fact that Kerrey had never spoken publicly about the events in Thanh Phong until he was made aware of the *Times*/CBS investigation. There is no reference to the incident in his official biographies, either for the US Senate or for the New School, although his receipt of the Bronze Star has been a well-known fact. His posture throughout the affair has been self-serving: he acknowledges wrongdoing, expresses guilt and shame, and expects as a result to face no consequences for his actions. And the media chimes in, presenting Kerrey as the victim, not the 21 people his squad massacred in 1969.

Kerrey's own conduct reeks of a sense of guilty knowledge—even now he declines to directly contradict Klann, only claiming that they have different recollections. The former senator suggests alternately that he cannot remember the events precisely and that he knows he did not do what Klann says he did. His claim not to remember the details of Thanh Phong is not credible. This was one of only a handful of live-fire actions in Kerrey's brief military career—he arrived in Vietnam in January 1969 and invalidated out after a grenade took off part of his leg two months later. The events would be indelible, unless there was a powerful reason to forget.

While five other members of the SEALs squad support Kerrey's claims, this is hardly to be taken as genuine corroboration, since statements to the contrary would lay them open to criminal prosecution. There is no statute of limitations on war crimes. And two survivors of the village—one a teenage girl at the time, the other the wife of an NLF cadre—independently confirmed details of Klann's account, including his description of how the SEALs slit the throats of an elderly man, his wife and three grandchildren in the first hut they encountered when they entered the village. The graves of these five victims, marked with a common date of death, can be seen in the village today.

A criminal war

In one sense, these differences are secondary in evaluating Kerrey's actions. Even if one takes the former senator at his word, Thanh Phong was a war crime. Kerrey was, after all, the leader of an assassination squad sent out by the US military command to commit murder. That his victims included women and children in addition to men was by no means unusual. The raid on Thanh Phong was part of Operation Phoenix, the CIA-run program targeting the Vietnamese political leadership in the South, under which anywhere from 20,000 to 70,000 cadres and supporters of the National Liberation Front—and their families—were assassinated.

The standing order for raids such as that on Thanh Phong was to take no prisoners and to kill any Vietnamese who crossed paths with the US forces. Elderly men, women and children were all assumed to be legitimate targets—in part because, as a genuine, revolutionary struggle, the Vietnamese resistance to US occupation mobilized every section of the people, including children. The American war in Vietnam, as a counterrevolutionary war against virtually the whole population of the country, necessarily involved slaughter on an indiscriminate scale.

Kerrey and his men killed 21 people on the night of February

25, 1969. The decade-long US military intervention in Vietnam killed three million Vietnamese, as well as more than 60,000 American soldiers, sailors and airmen who lost their lives. Much of the countryside was laid waste through carpet-bombing, napalm and widespread use of chemical defoliants, and even a quarter century after the end of the war, the economic and ecological impact remain enormous.

While Kerrey may be guilty of a war crime, there are others who should stand in front of him in the dock—the surviving top US political and military officials responsible for the genocidal policies in Vietnam, from Henry Kissinger and General William Westmoreland to former CIA Director Richard Helms, and the numerous generals, diplomats, “advisers” and administrators who played essential roles in the war.

That is why the exposure of Kerrey has been greeted with such an outpouring of sympathy from Democratic and Republican politicians and the media. Kerrey was only a minor player in a vast array of official criminals who ultimately met political and military defeat in Vietnam, but were never brought to justice.

There is a tremendous nervousness in the American political establishment over the reopening of old wounds. The entire ruling elite was implicated in the crimes of Vietnam and deeply discredited in the eyes of the American people. The war involved government duplicity and deceit on a monumental scale and countless illegal actions, at home as well as in Vietnam itself.

One of the most infamous actions was the commutation of sentence awarded by President Nixon to Lieutenant William Calley Jr. after he had been convicted of murdering more than 100 Vietnamese civilians in the My Lai massacre—the best known US atrocity of the war, and one of the bloodiest, involving the systematic killing of over 500 men, women and children, most of them shot at pointblank range. Nixon's commutation, generally applauded by the political establishment, amounted to a public endorsement of mass murder.

The case of Robert Kerrey raises the same issues. It cuts across the protracted efforts of the ruling class to rehabilitate the Vietnam War and revive its ability to wage war abroad without domestic opposition. One has only to recall the current president's father, during the 1991 Persian Gulf War, proclaiming that he was doing away with the “Vietnam syndrome.” It is for this reason that the right-wing press, especially publications such as the *Wall Street Journal*, has come strongly to Kerrey's defense.

The historical dimensions

Two arguments have been advanced by Kerrey's defenders—more numerous by far than critics—in official circles. The most bankrupt excuse is that these events took place a long time ago, eyewitness accounts may differ, and it is best to let sleeping dogs lie.

But there are crimes of such a magnitude, and of such an historical dimension, that they remain burning issues even after the passing of a generation or even two. Nazi war criminals have been pursued for more than 50 years, and not only the top leaders, the architects of the Holocaust, but those who complemented it from day to day, the concentration camp guards and commanders of killing units—the William Calleys and Robert Kerreys.

Former UN Secretary General Kurt Waldheim was subjected to international boycott after it was revealed—after he had left the UN and was president of Austria—that he had been an active Nazi officer in Yugoslavia during World War II, linked to terrible atrocities against the Serbian people. The United States joined in international sanctions against Austria at the time.

There are examples in America as well. No one suggests that it was a useless exercise to bring Thomas Blanton to trial last month for the murder of four little girls in the 1963 Birmingham, Alabama church bombing. Why is a prosecution of Robert Kerrey for the 1969 murder of women and children in Thanh Phong unthinkable? Because the victims were Vietnamese and not Americans?

Moreover, as the successfully concluded trial of Blanton

demonstrated, it is possible to mount a serious and effective prosecution of a monstrous crime, even one nearly 40 years old, given a shift in public attitudes. American public opinion, even among Southern whites, now regards the Ku Klux Klan atrocities of the 1960s with revulsion. The campaign in defense of Kerrey testifies, on the contrary, to an extraordinary official effort to legitimize the far greater atrocities of US imperialism in Vietnam.

The other argument on behalf of Kerrey is that his actions must be measured by a different yardstick because they took place in the context of war. Kerrey was only carrying out a military mission and cannot be held responsible for the outcome. This is little more than a revival, in a thin disguise, of the defense offered by the Nazi leaders at Nuremberg that they were “just following orders” of Adolf Hitler.

Yes, Kerrey was carrying out the orders of Richard Nixon, Richard Helms, General Creighton Abrams and other top US officials. But he chose to enlist in the Navy SEALs, a specialized assassination force that is the closest US military equivalent to the Nazi SS. As he himself admitted, he wanted to go after the Vietnamese “with a knife between my teeth.” Subsequently, he accepted a Congressional Medal of Honor at a White House ceremony in May 1970, only a few days after Nixon had ordered the invasion of Cambodia and publicly defended the murder of students at Kent State University.

Kerrey profited from his war record throughout his political career as governor of Nebraska, US senator, and an unsuccessful candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1992. He has been widely viewed as a potential presidential candidate in 2004. Unlike Waldheim, who downplayed and disguised his wartime record, Kerrey's political rise took as its starting point his persona as a “hero” of the war in Vietnam.

The United States and war crimes

The exposure of Kerrey has touched a raw nerve in the American political elite, and not only because there are many skeletons of the Vietnam War era which they would like to keep in the closet. Especially after the end of the Cold War, defending human rights has become the principal rationale for US interventions overseas. In Panama, in Iraq, in Somalia, in Yugoslavia and elsewhere, the White House and State Department have sought to make use of real or concocted atrocities as pretexts for military action.

The bombing campaign against Yugoslavia in 1999 was allegedly a response to Serbian “ethnic cleansing” in Kosovo, with the January 1999 massacre at Racak presented as Exhibit A in the indictment of then Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic by the war crimes tribunal at The Hague. Racak, like Thanh Phong, involved a military raid on a village held by guerrilla opponents, in which several dozen villagers were killed.

Unlike Thanh Phong, however, where all the victims were noncombatants, most of those who died at Racak were fighters of the Kosovo Liberation Army, and there is considerable evidence suggesting that the KLA rigged the scene for the western media, assembling the bodies of its slain commandos in a row to make it appear that they had been mowed down, execution-style, rather than being killed in a firefight with the Yugoslav Army.

US officials are well aware that war crimes charges can easily cut both ways. For that reason, they opposed the extradition of Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet for the murder of thousands after the 1973 CIA-backed military coup—crimes for which Helms, Kissinger & Co. could easily have been indicted as well.

While using institutions like the Hague tribunal when it serves its foreign policy interests, to demonize a Milosevic, Washington has consistently refused to allow its own actions and its own officials to be the subject of any international court—for fear that such bodies, not being completely under the control of the American ruling class, might take action, however limited, against US military interventions around the world.

Kerrey and the New School

That Kerrey has been subject to these charges only a few weeks

after taking office as president of the New School adds an important political and cultural dimension to the case. The New School is not simply any college, but one of the bastions of liberal and progressive thought in the United States. To place at its head a man charged with mass murder is particularly provocative.

The New School for Social Research was founded in 1919 by, among others, historian Charles Beard, philosopher John Dewey and economist and social critic Thorstein Veblen. Among those who lectured there were W.E.B. Dubois, John Maynard Keynes, Aaron Copland, Frank Lloyd Wright and James Baldwin. It gave rise to the famous Actors Workshop, from which many of the most prominent actors of the past two generations got their training.

In the late 1930s and during World War II, the New School became the home in exile for a large number of prominent German and Jewish refugees from Nazism, including many of those who comprised the Frankfurt School of Marxist-influenced social and cultural criticism. Max Horkheimer taught there, as did Hannah Arendt, author of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

The Board of Trustees of the New School answered the exposure of Kerrey's actions in Vietnam by pledging its "unconditional support" for their new president. This sickening embrace came despite the fact that Kerrey concealed his record from the board before he was selected to head the university.

The issue has not yet aroused significant protest among the faculty or students at the New School. That testifies to the protracted decay of liberalism in the generation which has passed since conflicts over the Vietnam War rocked every college campus in America.

More broadly, no serious opposition to Kerrey and no demand for the exposure of the crimes of Vietnam can be expected from liberal quarters generally. The Vietnam War was organized and politically implemented by the Democratic Party, backed by the labor bureaucracy and the liberal academic and intellectual establishment which embraced the anticommunist rationale for genocidal measures in Southeast Asia.

The media furor over Kerrey's role in Vietnam has been very limited, and now is beginning to abate. The ruling circles are testing out public opinion on this issue. If they succeed in retaining an accused war criminal at the head of one of the best-known intellectual centers in America, they will have struck a powerful blow for the rehabilitation of the Vietnam War and of imperialist foreign policy as a whole.

They should not be allowed to get away with it. The *World Socialist Web Site* rejects the cringing philosophy of "let bygones be bygones." An entire generation has grown up in America with little knowledge of the Vietnam War and amidst a systematic attempt to rehabilitate the war and block any understanding of the issues that moved millions in the United States and internationally to oppose the war.

How many students and young people today are aware that in 1969, when Lt. Robert Kerrey led his squad into Thanh Phong, the American government was deservedly hated throughout the world? The United States was identified with napalm, saturation bombing, concentration camps ("strategic hamlets"), assassination, torture ("tiger cages"), with the barbaric policy of "destroying the village in order to save it."

The ruling elite seeks to bury this history both to cover up its complicity in old crimes, and to pave the way for new ones. Already the Bush administration has threatened China, bombed Iraq, stepped up intervention in Colombia, scrapped the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and provoked its own erstwhile allies with unilateral actions on trade and the environment.

But still the legacy of Vietnam remains—the fear on the part of the ruling class that a protracted US war will produce uncontrollable political and social conflicts at home. It is this which drives the attempt to sweep Thanh Phong under the rug. And it is the intensifying social contradictions within America on which opponents of American imperialism and militarism must rely in seeking to mobilize the working people against new Vietnams.

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