

New York's New School president accused of war crimes

What is at stake in the fight to remove Robert Kerrey?

By the Editorial Board
1 June 2001

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party call for the organization of the broadest campaign to demand the removal of former Democratic Senator Robert Kerrey, who has admitted committing atrocities during the Vietnam War, from the presidency of the New School University in New York City. We call on all students and faculty, and working people in New York and across the country, to end the political obscenity of a war criminal presiding over an American university.

The decision by the Board of Trustees to retain Kerrey at the New School, an institution with a renowned intellectual tradition, is a political and moral provocation. Kerrey's presence is an offense to the memory of the millions who were killed and maimed in this imperialist war: the Vietnamese, who were the victims of a decade-long US aggression, and the tens of thousands of American working class youth who were dispatched to fight and die in the jungles of Southeast Asia.

Enormous issues are bound up with this controversy that go beyond the fate of Kerrey himself. First is the attempt by the political and academic establishment and the media to fumigate and declare "honorable" a war that constitutes one of the most shameful and reactionary chapters in US history. The levers of public opinion are being pulled in a campaign of historical falsification of a type associated until now with totalitarian regimes.

Vietnam was an undeclared war, organized behind the backs of the American people and justified on the basis of a provocation staged in the Gulf of Tonkin by US naval forces in 1964. An entire generation came to political maturity against the backdrop of this illegal and immoral conflict. Vietnam radicalized millions, exposing the fraud of American "democracy." It discredited the Democratic Party and put the lie to the pretensions of Cold War liberalism.

There was good reason for the mass opposition that shattered the Johnson and Nixon administrations. Short of using nuclear weapons, the American military brought its full arsenal of destruction to bear on a small, underdeveloped country. Three million Vietnamese were killed by the US military. By 1985 one-third of the country was considered wasteland, thanks to the use of chemical defoliants. The United States dropped more bombs on Vietnam than the total dropped by all sides on Europe, Asia and Africa during World War II.

One only has to consider the names and phrases associated with the war: napalm, My Lai, "search and destroy," Agent Orange, body count, "It was necessary to destroy the village to save it" and many more. These have entered into modern

consciousness much as "blitzkrieg" did for earlier generations.

The defense of Kerrey and the attempt to legitimize the Vietnam War bear not only on the past and the present, but also on the future. They are part of the preparation for new crimes by American capitalism, crimes that are already in the planning stages.

During the past decade the US has intervened in Iraq, Somalia, the Balkans and numerous other places around the world. With every military action, the media has hit away at the need to overcome the "Vietnam syndrome." This means that the big business politicians must shed their fear of the consequences of American soldiers once again coming home in body bags. It means as well that the American population must be inured to violence and brutality, both abroad and at home.

In its attitude toward the past, the political establishment gives an indication of its vision of the future. Where is America going? An elite that tolerates a war criminal as the head of one of its most prestigious institutions of higher learning will tolerate anything, including the use of nuclear weapons.

The facts of the case and the official response

What facts have emerged concerning Kerrey's actions in Vietnam?

Kerrey has acknowledged his role in an atrocity when, on February 25, 1969, he and six others under his command killed some 21 women, children and elderly men in the village of Thanh Phong. The raid was conducted as part of Operation Phoenix, the CIA-run program that involved the torture of hundreds of thousands and the assassination of 20,000 people between 1967 and 1969.

One of the members of Kerrey's squad, Gerhard Klann, asserts that the villagers were rounded up after the village was under the unit's control and massacred at point-blank range. Douglas Valentine, in a well-documented piece on the Counterpunch web site, claims: "Kerrey was on a CIA mission, and its specific purpose was to kill those women and children" as part of a wider strategy aimed at terrorizing and intimidating supporters of the National Liberation Front ("Viet Cong").

What has been the response?

The media, right-wing and liberal, has come to Kerrey's defense, apologizing for his actions and attempting to bury the controversy. The editorialists of the *Wall Street Journal* and their ilk want Kerrey's murderous actions to be legitimized and justified. They want an end to the "squeamishness" on the part of America's political leaders. Jaded liberals and ex-liberals, whose views are reflected in the pages of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, either shrug their shoulders and

mutter, “What’s the big deal?” or interpret Kerrey’s action as another proof of the general infamy of humankind. Such people are preparing to accommodate themselves to new crimes.

The New School’s Board of Trustees, who did not even feel the need to launch an inquiry into the charges, declared that they fully supported Kerrey. Their rush to solidarize themselves with Kerrey speaks to the political and moral degradation of these circles.

This outrage cannot stand.

It was Hannah Arendt, at the time of her death a professor of political philosophy at the New School, who coined the phrase the “banality of evil” in her famous essay Eichmann in Jerusalem. Eichmann, the individual responsible for the deportation and liquidation of the European Jews, was not a monster, Arendt wrote. He was “terribly and terrifyingly normal.”

But, Arendt observed, his crime was of such a magnitude that “no member of the human race can be expected to want to share the earth with you.”

Kerrey, perpetrator of a far smaller, but nonetheless heinous crime, is no less banal a figure. The issue before students and faculty at the New School is not meting out criminal punishment. That responsibility falls elsewhere. But those associated with the New School do have the political and moral obligation to say, “We do not choose to share this institution with you.”

The defense of Kerrey by the political establishment is not an expression of the strength of the American ruling class, but rather its degeneracy.

It has been repeatedly demonstrated—in the impeachment scandal, in the 2000 election crisis—that the media, far from reporting the truth or mirroring the feelings of the population, manipulates and orchestrates public opinion and functions as a direct instrument of big business. The corporate-controlled

media and the establishment it defends are discredited and isolated. Now they are trying to convince themselves that the public is indifferent to the crimes of the Vietnam War and that “no one cares,” as if such a devastating and traumatic event could be washed away by propaganda.

We reject the apologetics for Kerrey and for the atrocities committed by US imperialism in Vietnam. Those who dismiss these crimes reveal not only their cowardice and callousness, but their alienation from the population at large. The official defense of Kerrey is an expression of the irreconcilable conflict between the interests of the corporate-political elite and the needs and aspirations of working people.

The struggle to remove Kerrey must be based on a direct appeal to the working population of New York and the nation. The coming weeks and months should be used to build up opposition to his presidency of the New School, placing at the center of the campaign the education of the public on the history and lessons of the Vietnam tragedy.

The issue of historical truth is at the heart of this struggle. Students, faculty members and the working class public must not allow this terrible episode in American history to be swept under the rug. A full and honest appraisal of the US role in Vietnam—and of American and world history as a whole—is an indispensable foundation for the development of a political struggle against militarism, inequality and the exploitative system which breeds these evils. It is not simply the individual perpetrator Kerrey, but rather American capitalism and the US ruling elite that authored the Vietnam War and are preparing new tragedies, that should be the central focus of this effort.

The real state of public opinion is never revealed until an attempt is made to mobilize it. The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party will do everything in their power to advance and assist this struggle.

© World Socialist Web Site <http://www.wsws.org>

To contact the World Socialist Web Site e-mail: editor@wsws.org

USA: Socialist Equality Party, PO Box 48377, Oak Park, MI 48237 USA Telephone 248 967 2924

Australia: Socialist Equality Party, PO Box 367, Bankstown, Sydney, NSW 1885 Telephone 02 9790 3511

Britain: Socialist Equality Party, PO Box 1306, Sheffield S9 3 UW England Telephone 114 244 3545