

# New School students demand ouster of Kerrey over Vietnam War atrocity

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Students at the New School University in New York City are demanding the resignation of the newly installed president of the college, former US Senator Robert Kerrey, over his role in a wartime atrocity in Vietnam.

A meeting of the Graduate Faculty Student Union May 10 voted by a nearly 2-1 margin to call for Kerrey's resignation. A second resolution urging a congressional investigation into the massacre of 21 women, children and old men in 1969 passed overwhelmingly. This action came in defiance of the defense of Kerrey offered by the university's board of directors, most of the media, and an array of senators and other political figures, especially in the Democratic Party.

The issue is a defining moment in American politics, and the silence or indifference that characterizes the response from the New York liberal milieu bespeaks the putrefaction of American liberalism. Those who are prepared to accept the presence of a war criminal in the top position at one of the most prestigious American universities are prepared to accept virtually any atrocity.

The Socialist Equality Party and its organ, the *World Socialist Web Site*, strongly support the action of the Graduate Faculty Student Union and urge all students, faculty and campus workers at the New School University to join forces in demanding the removal of Kerrey as president. This action is a necessary step in a campaign to expose and oppose the forces of militarism and reaction that have rallied to his defense.

It has been two weeks since the *New York Times* and the CBS program *Sixty Minutes II* made public the events of February 25, 1969 in Thanh Phong, a village in the Mekong Delta in territory known to be controlled by the National Liberation Front ("Viet Cong"), the guerrilla forces who were fighting the American military and the Saigon-based puppet government of South Vietnam.

After the initial exposure of the Thanh Phong massacre, the media has largely dropped the issue. There has been little exploration of the contradictions in Kerrey's statements about the incident, and the growing evidence that supports the account by Gerhard Klann, a member of the Navy SEALs unit that Kerrey commanded. Klann has declared that more than a dozen Vietnamese women, children and elderly men were rounded up and mowed down with machine-gun fire at Kerry's orders—a war crime even by the standards adopted by the Pentagon in Vietnam.

Three significant issues of fact bolster Klann's account and discredit Kerrey's as self-serving and false:

\* All accounts agree that the bodies of 13 victims were found at a central location in the village. If the killings were, as Kerrey claims, the result of a nighttime firefight, why were the bodies clustered together and in the open? Moreover, as the *Times* article by Gregory Vistica points out, it is difficult to see how gunfire from 100 yards away, no matter how intense, could kill every single person caught in the crossfire. The uniformity of the result suggests an attack at point-blank range. Asked about this contradiction in his story, Kerrey said, "I can't explain. I do not have an explanation for that."

\* Klann and several Vietnamese witnesses describe Navy SEALs

slitting the throats of a grandfather, a grandmother and three children in the first hut they encountered in the village. The statement issued by Kerrey and the other squad members in response to Klann essentially concedes this act of murder, admitting that they resorted to "lethal methods to keep our presence from being detected."

\* In an interview with the *Times*, Kerrey said he and his squad entered the center of the village and found the bodies of the victims. But the statement issued by Kerrey and five other SEALs a few days after the *Times* article was published provides a diametrically opposite account, saying that they "withdrew" from the village "while continuing to fire."

Additional testimony has emerged from Vietnam to support Klann's eyewitness account. While the official comments from Hanoi have been noncommittal, avoiding the words "war crime" and noting that Kerrey has supported restoration of diplomatic and economic ties between the US and Vietnam, a local official in Ben Tre province called the Thanh Phong massacre a major atrocity. Pham Di Cu told Reuters news agency, "I think in terms of brutality, this was the worst incident in this province during the war. Personally, I think it was inhuman. In terms of the way it was done, it was a war crime."

A former NLF guerrilla in the province, Tran Van Rung, gave an interview confirming that a meeting of five local NLF officials—the target of the SEALs raid—had taken place in an underground bunker outside Thanh Phong. The group, including the mayor of the village, who Kerrey's unit was assigned to assassinate, were sleeping in the bunker when the gunfire erupted.

Rung said he and ten other soldiers stayed inside the bunker and did not attempt to fire on the American attackers because they were armed only with old bolt-action rifles and a few hand grenades. "We didn't leave the bunker," he said. "We didn't provoke the Americans." His testimony confirms the account given by Klann, who said there was no firefight and the SEALs entered and left the village unopposed. There were no casualties among the NLF fighters that night, further confirmation that the raid took them by surprise and they put up no resistance.

Unable to explain away the facts of an incident which even Kerrey, the chief perpetrator, describes as an "atrocity," Kerrey's defenders have begun to revive the same myths and slanders that were employed by the US government for a decade to justify its murderous enterprise in Vietnam.

Some commentaries blamed the Vietnamese themselves for the massacre. Thus former Secretary of the Navy—and Vietnam veteran—James Webb, writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, declared, "North Vietnamese troops were responsible for such massacres because they concealed themselves in the villages and used them as military bases."

This reproduces the old canard that the Vietnam War was the product of an invasion of South Vietnam by North Vietnam, as though the two had been separate and independent countries existing from time immemorial. Actually the division of the country into two halves was the product of US intervention to block implementation of the 1954 Geneva Accord, which

called for nationwide elections within two years. All sides concede that the Viet Minh led by Ho Chi Minh would have won a free vote. Many of the “North Vietnamese troops” were native to the villages in the South, just as many of the NLF cadres were born in the northern half of the country. None of them had traveled from the other side of the world to invade and lay waste a small country, like the American forces.

A *Washington Post* reporter who visited Thanh Phong echoed this slander in an even more inane form, writing, “The Viet Cong were an elusive enemy. They wore the same black pajama-like garments as farmers. Their ranks included women and children. During the day, they would join other peasants toiling in rice paddies.”

The Viet Cong were only pretending to be farmers, dressing like them and working among them, but only as a disguise, according to this absurd account. The truth, which the American ruling class still cannot concede three decades later, is that on the Vietnamese side the war was a genuine people’s war. Tens of thousands of ordinary peasants and workers took up arms against the imperialist forces, first the French colonial troops, then the Americans.

Another Vietnam-era tactic is to attack any journalist who dares to report the truth. Here again the *Wall Street Journal* took the lead, republishing, for lack of anything more effective, a 1996 commentary denouncing a book by Vistica critical of the US military.

Vistica has earned the opprobrium of the Pentagon, breaking the story of the Tailhook sexual harassment scandal while working as a reporter for the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, then going to work for *Newsweek*, looking into the falsification of decorations by the Navy brass.

Kerrey himself resorted to the tactic of smearing his critics as disloyal. He accused the *Times* and CBS of “collaborating” in a propaganda campaign to discredit America’s role in the war. “It’s disgraceful,” he told the Associated Press. “The Vietnamese government likes to routinely say how terrible Americans were. The *Times* and CBS are now collaborating in that effort.”

The exposure of Kerrey’s role in Vietnam has already had the salutary effect of focusing public attention, to at least a limited extent, on the barbaric character of the US intervention in Vietnam. This has been largely concealed from the generation of Americans who have grown up since the war ended in the overthrow of the South Vietnamese regime in 1975 and the flight of US and puppet government officials from the rooftop of the US Embassy in Saigon.

The war methods employed by successive governments, from Kennedy to Johnson to Nixon, combined large-scale destruction, using bombs, napalm, chemical defoliants and high-tech weaponry of all sorts, and individual assassination, torture and murder. The Allied powers dropped two million tons of bombs in the entire course of World War II. The United States dropped eight million tons of bombs on Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia alone. Much of the Vietnamese countryside was defoliated using poisons like Agent Orange, so toxic that even the soldiers who did the spraying suffered long-term damage to their health. Napalm, the jellied gasoline that burns its way into the human body, was dumped in huge quantities on Vietnamese villages and suspected NLF strongholds.

Until the 1969 exposure of My Lai, the massacre of more than 500 villagers by a US unit commanded by Capt. Ernest Medina and Lt. William Calley Jr., there was little or no reporting in the major American media about atrocities committed by US forces. But American reporters in Vietnam had witnessed Vietnamese prisoners being pushed from airplanes by American troops, shot while in captivity, or set upon by Dobermans unleashed by interrogators.

Journalist Neil Sheehan recently recalled that in 1966, three years prior to the events in Thanh Phong and My Lai, he personally witnessed an American operation in which US troops wiped out five fishing villages, killing as many as 600 Vietnamese civilians. The raids “seemed unnecessarily brutal,” but “it did not occur to me that I had discovered a

possible war crime... I had never read the laws governing the conduct of war, though I had watched the war for three years in Vietnam and written about it for five ... The Army field manual says it is illegal to attack hospitals. We routinely bombed and shelled them ... looking back, one realizes the war crimes issue was always present.”

The statements of Kerrey’s own defenders have served to confirm the brutality of the American war. Writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, Jack Valenti—the longtime chief lobbyist for the movie industry who was an aide to John F. Kennedy during the initial intervention in Vietnam—claimed that in wartime, “all the normalities of a social compact are abandoned.” In other words, anything goes once the fighting starts. Yet only two years ago the US government charged the Yugoslav government with war crimes for allegedly pursuing such a policy in Kosovo.

Three US senators who are Vietnam veterans, Max Cleland (D-Ga.), Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.) and John Kerry (D-Mass.), issued a statement defending Kerrey that inadvertently makes the same point. The three opposed an investigation into the Thanh Phong incident because it would be part of a pattern of blaming “the warrior rather than the war,” in effect conceding that the war as a whole was criminal in character.

John Kerry elaborated, in one television appearance, on the thesis that soldiers should not be held responsible for actions that were in accordance with the policies of the US government. The raid on Thanh Phong was part of Operation Phoenix, he said, and “the Phoenix program was an assassination program run by the United States of America.”

It is worth recalling what the same John Kerry said in 1971 when he first came to prominence as a Navy lieutenant and leader of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, in testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

“I would like to say that several months ago in Detroit we had an investigation at which over 150 honorably discharged veterans testified to war crimes committed in Southeast Asia,” Kerry said. “They told stories that at times they had personally raped, cut off ears, cut off heads, taped wires from portable telephones to human genitals and turned up the power, cut off limbs, blown up bodies, randomly shot at civilians, razed villages in a fashion reminiscent of Genghis Khan, shot cattle and dogs for fun, poisoned food stocks and generally ravaged the countryside of South Vietnam, in addition to the normal ravage of war and the normal and very particular ravaging which is done by the applied bombing power of this country.”

At a packed meeting on the New School campus the week after the *Times* report, attended by over 500 faculty and students, Robert Kerrey sought to defend his conduct, giving an account of the raid by the squad of Navy SEALs he commanded, and taking some questions from the floor. He called upon former *Times* reporter and author David Halberstam, who described the Mekong Delta region around Thanh Phong as “the purest bandit country.” Halberstam went on to say that “by 1969 everyone who lived there would have been third-generation Vietcong.”

Aside from the absurdity of the claim of “third-generation Vietcong”, since the NLF was founded in 1960, Halberstam’s comments amount to a justification of mass murder. If “everyone who lived there” were Vietcong, then killing “everyone”—men, women and children—was part and parcel of the war effort.

Halberstam’s defense of Kerrey is symbolic, since he is well known as the author of *The Best and the Brightest*, a scathing account of the decision-making process inside the Kennedy and Johnson administrations that led to the Vietnam debacle. A liberal who became a successful author and historian thanks to his critical attitude to the Vietnam War, Halberstam has evolved into an apologist for the atrocities he once condemned.

The Kerrey case demonstrates that the fissures within American society over the Vietnam War have never been healed, only papered over.

Although the vast majority of the American people came to oppose the war as immoral and unjust, the two big business political parties and the official opinion-makers, as part of their general drift to the right, defend the US intervention in Vietnam.

The Republican Party and the far right have long maintained that the Vietnam War was fully justified, only complaining that the methods employed by Johnson and Nixon were too limited to obtain a victory.

The Democratic Party has steadily moved away from the adaptation to antiwar opinion which it carried out in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in order to co-opt popular opposition to the war. A significant section of the Democratic Party supported US intervention in a covert war in Central America in the 1980s and voted in 1990 to authorize the Persian Gulf War.

A Democratic president who participated in antiwar protests in the 1960s, Bill Clinton, deployed US troops overseas during the 1990s in more interventions than any previous president—Somalia, Bosnia, Haiti, Kosovo, Iraq, Taiwan, to name only the best known. Democrat Al Gore ran in 2000 boasting of his support for the Gulf War and calling for a bigger increase in military spending than George Bush.

The defense of Kerrey is essential for both parties in order to rehabilitate the Vietnam War in public opinion. It is inevitably associated with a right-wing political agenda and the legitimization of war as an instrument of US policy.

Kerrey is not just any former politician turned university president. He was a key figure in the Democratic Leadership Council, the grouping headed by Clinton and Gore that orchestrated the rightward turn of the Democratic Party and its embrace of law-and-order demagoguery, attacks on welfare recipients, and increased military spending.

The exposure of Kerrey and the demand for his ouster as president of New School University are important steps in opposing American militarism, and especially its liberal apologists.

It is particularly outrageous that such an individual should be placed at the head of an institution previously identified with socially conscious thought. Among the founders of the New School were several professors expelled by Columbia University in 1917 for their opposition to US participation in World War I. For decades it remained a center of progressive ideas and opposition to fascism and militarism.

For those who came of age during the 1960s and early 1970s, events like My Lai, the incursion into Cambodia, Kent State and the Christmas bombing of Hanoi are seared into memory. For the new generations that have grown up since then, it is necessary to relearn these lessons of history. The demand for Kerrey's removal at New School must become part of a campaign to expose the reactionary, bloody character of the Vietnam War and prepare the American people to oppose the new plans for worldwide military action being developed by the Pentagon and the Bush administration.

The role of the liberals and the Democrats in defending Kerrey demonstrates that such a struggle against American imperialism and militarism can only be conducted on the basis of the independent mobilization of the broad mass of working people. The working class must build a political party of its own, independent of the big business parties and the liberal establishment, and based on a socialist and internationalist program.



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