

Robert Kerrey defends Vietnam War in meeting with New School students

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At a meeting this past Monday, some 200 graduate students confronted New School University President and former US Senator Robert Kerrey concerning his role in the massacre of Vietnamese civilians in 1969. The meeting followed a May 10 vote by the student union at the university's Graduate Faculty of Political and Social Science demanding Kerrey's resignation as president of the New York City institution and calling for a congressional investigation into the atrocity in the village of Thanh Phong, where 21 women, children and elderly men were murdered.

At the meeting Kerrey maintained the stance he has taken publicly since his role as commander of a Navy Seal unit that carried out a massacre of Vietnamese civilians was revealed by the *New York Times* and CBS television nearly three weeks ago. He combined expressions of contrition with statements defending the US war in Vietnam.

Kerrey's avowed regret for his role in the slaughter of civilians did not prevent him from opposing the student union's call for a congressional investigation into the massacre. The former Democratic senator and presidential aspirant lamely told the students that such inquiries “never settle doubts.”

He dismissed as “unreliable” the account given by fellow Navy Seal Gerhard Klann and Vietnamese eyewitnesses, who assert that Kerrey's squadron rounded up and massacred the civilians. Without offering any facts to disprove this account, Kerrey restated his position that the civilians were caught in a crossfire between his troops and “Viet Cong” soldiers.

According to students in attendance—reporters were barred—the meeting was tightly controlled by Kerrey and the New School administration, whose Board of Trustees has publicly declared its “unqualified support” for its presidential appointee. The meeting was limited

to one hour and the majority of the students' questions were left unanswered.

After the meeting one graduate student, Richard Gilman Opalsky, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “Kerrey characterized the Vietnam War as a freedom fight and a just war and said he was proud to serve his country. He talks about Nixon and makes some criticisms of the war, but he says that American military force has been successful in keeping the peace. He quickly changed the subject when a student talked about ‘US imperialism’ in Vietnam.

“Kerrey says you can never settle doubts about what happened. But in this instance, to whom should we give the benefit of the doubt: the Vietnamese victims, whose bodies were piled up, or the perpetrators—Navy Seal commandos operating in—of all wars—the Vietnam War?”

Alluding to the 1999 murder of African immigrant Amadou Diallo by New York City police, Opalsky asked, “Should we have given the benefit of the doubt to the victim who was shot with 41 bullets, or to the police department's Street Crimes Unit?”

Kerrey's continued presence at the university, Opalsky said, “undermines the intellectual and political commitment” of the New School. “We shouldn't be asking him any more questions, we should be focusing all our efforts among the students and faculty to get him out.”

The resolutions of the Graduate Faculty Student Union were passed in the face of opposition from the school administration, the news media—which has all but dropped the story—and most of New York's liberal establishment. The faculty at the New School, which was founded by professors who opposed militarism in World War I and was long associated with left-wing and progressive ideas, has maintained a deafening

silence.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with a number of New School students involved in the campaign to force Kerrey's resignation. Martin Plot is a member of the student union who voted for Kerrey's removal. He said, "The president of a university represents you. How can we have someone who is so contrary to our values? Throughout history you could not have had war crimes without thousands who gave and followed immoral orders. Now, 30 years afterwards, Kerrey and the Board of Trustees justify his actions by saying 'war is hell' and he was just following orders."

"During the military dictatorships in Argentina, Chile and other Latin American countries military officers and soldiers were involved in kidnapping and killing civilians. In Argentina there is now a sense of 'never again' in relationship to these crimes. In America, however, there is no sense of 'never again' towards Vietnam—no coming to terms with your own murderers. But that is the foundation for any democratic regime."

Charles, another student union member who voted for Kerrey's removal, said, "I came to this school because of its humanitarian history. On the one hand we espouse human principles—like those advanced by faculty members who escaped Nazism—and on the other we have a president who has admitted killing innocent people. He cannot run away by saying he was following orders. What were the Nuremburg trials all about?"

Daniel Schneider, a graduate student from Germany, added, "Over the last three weeks Kerrey has repeatedly shown that he still supports the Vietnam War. But how can the carpet bombing of a people be justified? His speeches sound like he is still in the Cold War. His anticommunism is a strange thing at the New School."

"Most members of the faculty opposed the war. Kerrey has no idea how deep the feelings are about this. The Board of Trustees thinks it's entitled to speak for the whole community when it defends him. It doesn't."

Priscilla, a graduate student, said, "If you read Kerrey's speeches on the New School University web site he talks about the fight for democracy in Vietnam. I'm 45 and part of that era. The war was fought for economic and political reasons. By 1969 American society was going through a break and people began opposing the system and the immoral war."

"As for the Board of Trustees, all they are concerned

with is whether they can make the school more salable with Kerrey. The education system has moved to a market economy and the board is trying to compete in a city that has New York University and Columbia. The former president left and after a long search they finally got Kerrey, whose name is good for fundraising. That's why they rallied around him."

Jamie Wilson, a fine arts student, said, "It would be intolerable for any university to have a war criminal as its president, but it is an absolute disgrace for it to happen at the New School, which has long been a bastion of progressive thought. It is part of totalitarianism—which this school has fought—to eradicate history."

"Kerrey and the school administration have tried to combat his opponents by staging forums—I call them love-ins—where he doesn't answer any hard intellectual questions. Instead he says, 'We were all part of this great tragedy. It was hell out there.' He tries to put a human face on his actions in Vietnam and say he had no personal responsibility and was just following orders. And this is at a school where Hanna Arendt taught, who denounced as the 'banality of evil' the attempt of Nazi killers to use this excuse to cover up their crimes."

"The US uses war crimes charges for its own purposes. It is total hypocrisy to call Saddam Hussein, Noriega and Milosevic—all former puppets of the US—war criminals, when Kerrey and others are not held accountable for Vietnam."



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