The case of Robert Kerrey: how the US media covered up Vietnam War atrocity story

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For a single week in late April, the American media devoted considerable attention to the involvement of former US Senator Robert Kerrey, now the president of New School University in New York City, in a Vietnam War massacre 32 years ago.

A cover story in the *New York Times Magazine* and an hour-long report on the CBS program *Sixty Minutes II* touched off the brief and superficial examination of the actions of a squad of US Navy SEALS, led by Kerrey, in the Mekong Delta village of Thanh Phong, which killed 21 women, children and elderly men on the night of February 25, 1969.

But there was little notice and no condemnation of the fact that *Newsweek* magazine, one of the three big US weeklies, had a draft of the story in 1998 and decided to suppress it. Gregory Vistica, then a national security correspondent for the magazine, had uncovered the truth about Thanh Phong, interviewing, among others, Gerhard Klann, the former SEAL who described the killings as a deliberate massacre ordered by Kerrey.

Newsweek Editor Mark Whitaker and assistant managing editor Evan Thomas claim that they decided to kill the story after Kerrey announced, in December 1998, that he would not be a candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2000. “We all agreed there's a higher level of scrutiny that goes on for presidential candidates,” Whitaker said in response to media inquiries. “At that point, in my mind, the relevance of this story changed a little bit.”

“We could have run the story,” added Thomas, who interviewed Kerrey together with Vistica. “We had Kerrey's confirmation. We just didn't want to do it to the guy when he wasn't running for president.” Thomas said the editors were also concerned that they might be accused of driving Kerrey out of the presidential contest if they made their investigation public.

Such scruples appear unlikely on their face, given that the magazine in question, *Newsweek*, conducted a brazenly political intervention into the Paula Jones lawsuit and subsequently the Lewinsky affair, working hand-in-hand with the right-wing lawyers and political operatives who were conspiring to destabilize the Clinton presidency. *Newsweek* hired former *Washington Post* reporter Michael Isikoff, who befriended Paula Jones and devoted himself full-time to uncovering the alleged sexual misdeeds of President Clinton.

Isikoff did the spadework for a 1997 *Newsweek* cover story on the Paula Jones case, portraying it as a legitimate effort to combat sexual harassment. He later reported the alleged “groping” of Kathleen Willey by Clinton, and was the first journalist to hear the illegally taped conversations between Monica Lewinsky and Linda Tripp. Finally he worked closely with Tripp and former Nixon dirty trickster Lucianne Goldberg in the weeks leading up to the detonation of the Lewinsky scandal in January 1998.

There is an obvious contrast between the magazine's manic efforts to expose a private sexual affair in the Clinton White House, and its reticence about bringing to light a mass murder implicating a US senator and presidential hopeful.

Even more importantly, it appears that *Newsweek* first learned of the Thanh Phong massacre, not in 1998 but in 1992. According syndicated military columnist David Hackworth, a retired Vietnam-era colonel who writes for *Newsweek*, he was contacted by a “former SEAL” in 1992 who told him essentially the same story that Gregory Vistica reported last month. Hackworth and *Newsweek* editor Maynard Parker looked into the ex-soldier's claims and “walked away.”

Hackworth gives two reasons for not running the

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story in 1992: conflicting recall of the events by participants, and the inability of the eyewitness to explain why he did not try to stop the massacre or report it later to superiors and waited so long to contact the media.

Remarkably, Hackworth defends Kerrey today on the grounds that in the Vietnam of 1969, most soldiers were engaged in similar actions. “Based on my almost five years in Vietnam,” Hackworth writes in his May 1 column, “during that shameful war, there were thousands of such atrocities... The draftee unit I skippered in 1969—as I've recently discovered while doing interviews for a new book—had at least a dozen such horrors... Everywhere our young men fought in Vietnam, where there were civilians, there was carnage.”

According to Hackworth, his 9th Division, stationed in the Mekong Delta where the Thanh Phong massacre took place, “reported killing more than 20,000 Viet Cong in 1968 and 1969, yet less than 2,000 weapons were found on the 'enemy' dead. How much of the 'body count' consisted of civilians?”

In 1992 Kerrey was one of a half-dozen candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination. There were two Vietnam-related exposés about Democratic candidates making the rounds of major news rooms. One was the story of Bill Clinton's efforts to evade the draft. The other was the report that Kerrey had been involved in war crimes. The Clinton “draft-dodger” story became an overnight media sensation—although the general public shrugged it off and Clinton won both the nomination and the presidency. The Kerrey war crimes story was buried—and remained so for the next nine years.

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