

The case of Robert Kerrey: war crimes and their supporters in Vietnam and Afghanistan

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The first reports of massacres of Taliban prisoners of war in Afghanistan appeared six weeks ago. The premeditated killing of hundreds of prisoners in the town of Mazar-i-Sharif was followed by evidence of other war crimes, including the mass suffocation of hundreds of prisoners inside metal cargo containers during a trip to a prison in another location after their surrender in the city of Kunduz, and the singling out of non-Afghan Taliban prisoners for extermination.

Calls for an investigation of these blatant violations of the 1949 Geneva Convention on the treatment of POWs have come from sections of the European media, as well as from such organizations as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, and United Nations human rights spokeswoman Mary Robinson. Major US media organizations, however, taking their cue from the Bush administration, have barely taken note of these appeals. After a brief flurry of articles a number of weeks ago the subject has been dropped. The so-called liberal press, including the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, has joined in covering up the story and lending its backhanded support to these atrocities.

The complicity of the liberal media is revealing but not unexpected. Almost eight months ago there was a preview of their cynical indifference on the issue of imperialist war crimes.

An article in the *New York Times* magazine of last April 29 and a report on the CBS program “60 Minutes II” revealed that former Democratic Senator Robert Kerrey, recently installed as president of the prestigious New School University, had participated in a death squad attack in the Vietnamese village of Thanh Phong in 1969. Kerrey, the commander of a Navy SEALs unit at the time, was accused of responsibility in the killing of 21 women, children and elderly men.

It was soon revealed that the media had reports of

Kerrey’s involvement as far back as 1992, but had covered it up. The revelation of the involvement of this prominent politician in war crimes, when it finally did emerge, clearly touched a raw nerve. Kerrey responded evasively, vaguely acknowledging wrongdoing, at the same time pleading memory lapses, and also defending US aims in Vietnam and contemptuously rejecting any call for an investigation of the incident.

Editorialists on both the “left” and right, along with Democratic and Republican colleagues of the former senator, immediately sprang to Kerrey’s defense. Democratic Senators Max Cleland and John Kerry, both Vietnam veterans, opposed an investigation of the war crime, saying it would be blaming “the warrior rather than the war.” Various commentators advanced similar arguments, implicitly admitting the criminal character of the war, but only in order to cover it up. According to this argument, the fact that Kerrey was a young man carrying out the orders of President Richard Nixon, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and other US officials means that there is no point in holding him responsible. The real aim of this method of reasoning is to proceed from the exoneration of Kerrey to the covering up of the higher-ups and of the US ruling elite as a whole.

The WSWWS explained last May 4 that the defense of Kerrey was “an extraordinary official effort to legitimize the ... atrocities of US imperialism in Vietnam” [“Robert Kerrey and the bloody legacy of Vietnam”]

“The media furor over Kerrey’s role in Vietnam has been very limited, and is now beginning to abate,” we wrote. “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.”

We continued, “The ruling elite seeks to bury” the history of US crimes in Vietnam “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.”

We explained that the issue of Kerrey’s role “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.”

We did not have long to wait to see the confirmation of these warnings. The US ruling class has seized on the events of September 11 to put in motion long-planned military operations to advance its interests in central Asia and the surrounding region. The defense of Kerrey was truly utilized, as the *WSWS* warned, to pave the way for new war crimes, this time in Mazar-i-Sharif, Kunduz, Kandahar and other Afghan cities. The Democrats and what passes for contemporary American liberalism are thoroughly complicit in these crimes.

In the final analysis, however, the lessons of Vietnam cannot simply be obliterated. The ruling elite can overcome its own “Vietnam syndrome” hesitation, and even whip up temporary support for new acts of aggression. However, as the *WSWS* also explained in connection with the whitewashing of Kerrey’s role, this is only the beginning. The cover-up of war crimes and the drumbeat of “national unity” are designed to obscure the deepening social contradictions within the US itself. Protracted war abroad and economic crisis at home will produce social and political struggles on a greater scale than at the time of the war in Vietnam, thus creating the social forces which can genuinely fight imperialist atrocities.



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