

Vietnam charges ex-Senator Bob Kerrey with war crimes

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The Vietnamese government has accused former US Senator Bob Kerrey of committing “war atrocities” during the Vietnam War. The charge came in response to a recently released autobiography, *When I was a Young Man*, in which Kerrey evades his responsibility for a massacre carried out by a Navy SEAL unit that he commanded 33 years ago.

“We have deeply understood and shared the pain and incomparable losses suffered by the families of the innocent victims in Thanh Phong who were mercilessly shot by Kerrey’s unit,” said Phan Thuy Than, spokeswoman for the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry. “Whatever Senator Kerrey says, it cannot change the truth. It was Kerrey himself who admitted his shame about the crime he committed,” Ms. Thanh stressed.

According to a report in *Nhan Dan*, the Vietnamese Communist Party daily, the Foreign Ministry spokeswoman declared that Kerrey and “others who committed war atrocities” should take practical steps to “help heal the wounds they caused.”

The report accused Kerrey, who is now president of the prestigious New School University in New York City, of contradicting in the book statements that he made last year acknowledging his role in the massacre.

In a section that is remarkably brief, given that Kerrey has said the event changed his life, the author speaks only in the vaguest terms about his own actions on the night of February 25, 1969, when he led his Navy SEAL squad into the tiny hamlet in the southern Mekong Delta. He writes:

“My point man led the way. He came to a house he said he believed was occupied by sentries. We had been trained that in such situations it would be too risky to move forward knowing that they would warn the men in the village unless we killed them or aborted the mission. I did not have to give an order to begin the killing but I could have stopped it and I didn’t.”

Did he give the order or not? Did he participate in the killing, or was he merely an innocent bystander? The reader is left in the dark.

Kerrey’s account evades the detailed description of the bloody start of the Thanh Phong raid that appeared in the *New York Times* magazine last year. A Navy enlisted man who served under Kerrey reported that there were five people in the house. An older man resisted and, according to this account, Kerrey knelt on his back while another raider cut his throat. The four others in the house—by one account a woman and three small children—were taken out and slaughtered separately.

Continuing the narrative in his new book, Kerrey says that he and his men proceeded into the village where they found only women and children, awakened by the noise and standing in front of their homes.

Someone fired a shot, he said, and the SEAL squad returned “a tremendous barrage of fire.”

“I saw women and children in front of us being hit and cut to pieces. I heard their cries and other voices in the darkness as we made our retreat to the canal.”

This constitutes Kerrey’s sole description of a night in which he and the men he commanded massacred 21 women, children and elderly men.

One of the raiders, Gerhard Klann, offered a far more detailed account of the killings to the *Times*. He insisted that no shots were fired at the SEALs and there was no “crossfire.” Rather, the Americans rounded up the civilians in the center of the village and massacred them at point-blank range. Vietnamese survivors of the attack have since come forward to confirm Klann’s rather than Kerrey’s version of the raid.

Kerrey is currently touring the country to promote his autobiography, appearing at bookstores and holding radio and television interviews. He has evaded press inquiries on the Vietnamese government statement, but angrily responded to a question posed at a bookstore appearance in Washington DC.

“I pointed out then, and I’m pointing out now, both sides did a lot of damage in the Vietnam War,” he said. “You gotta get beyond it. I’m quite certain the majority of people in Vietnam want to go on with their lives.”

This statement is in line with the concerted efforts by the media and Kerrey’s fellow politicians to squelch the controversy over his participation in the Thanh Phong massacre. The *New York Times* has not even reported the statement issued by Vietnam denouncing Kerrey as a war criminal.

While initially reviving accusations about the atrocity, Kerrey’s book appears to have been published as an exercise in damage control, intended to put the entire issue to rest. In the memoir, Kerrey paints himself, rather than the 21 massacre victims and their families, as the principal casualty of the events in Thanh Phong.

Kerrey’s position that “both sides did a lot of damage” and that the Vietnamese should “get over it” is nothing short of obscene, given the nature of the US war in Vietnam and his own role in it. More than three million Vietnamese were killed, most of them victims of US carpet bombing, napalm, and the type of massacres carried out by Kerrey in Thanh Phong. The most notorious of these was supervised by Lieutenant William Calley in My Lai, where 567 old men, women and children were killed, most of them shot to death in a ditch.

The raids that Kerrey led during his short stint in the Mekong Delta were part of a secret CIA assassination program known as Operation Phoenix, which sought to exterminate the political leadership of the

Vietnamese liberation struggle in the south. Operation Phoenix resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of men, women and children. Targeted in the Thanh Phong raid was the mayor of the hamlet, who was known to sympathize with the National Liberation Front rather than the US-backed regime in Saigon.

As for “getting beyond it,” millions of Vietnamese still suffer the consequences of the war. Agent Orange, the herbicide sprayed from US planes to destroy foliage and deprive Vietnamese liberation fighters of cover, has contaminated vast areas of the country. As a result of this chemical warfare, poisonous dioxins entered the food chain leaving millions of people with serious health problems, including an estimated half a million children with disabling birth defects. Washington has dismissed claims for compensation, asserting that there is insufficient proof and, like Kerrey, telling the Vietnamese to “get over it.”

Kerrey’s motives for glossing over his own role in the war and distorting the criminal nature of the US intervention are obvious. A prominent Democratic politician, he has bid for the Democratic presidential nomination in the past and is frequently cited as a potential presidential candidate in 2004. He has yet to rule out a run for the White House.

To a large extent Kerrey owes his political career to the Vietnam War, winning support as a decorated war hero—he received the Bronze Star based on a phony account of the Thanh Phong massacre that claimed the victims were “Viet Cong”—and the Congressional Medal of Honor for a subsequent raid in which he lost his lower leg to a grenade. While Vietnam veterans opposed to the war were throwing medals over the White House fence to protest US aggression, Kerrey, already out of the navy, traveled to Washington to accept the award from Richard Nixon.

Kerrey now claims to have long been haunted by the bloody encounter in Thanh Phong, but he kept the matter to himself until revelations about his role surfaced last year. In his successful political campaigns for the Nebraska governorship and a seat in the Senate, as well as his failed bid for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1992, he rested heavily on a war record that falsely depicted an atrocity against unarmed civilians as an act of heroism.

A fellow Nebraska politician and Vietnam War veteran, former state senator John DeCamp, visited Thanh Phong earlier this year, meeting with families of those killed in the massacre. He has called for a Defense Department investigation into the raid and has threatened to sue for reparations on the survivors’ behalf. Kerrey, he said, rebuffed proposals to help set up a foundation to aid the survivors.

Kerrey has dismissed DeCamp’s demands as “absurd and ridiculous.”

Why so? Members of the Serbian military are facing war crimes trials at The Hague for carrying out atrocities no more hideous than Kerrey’s in Vietnam. For that matter, low-ranking soldiers and guards who were merely “following orders” from the German SS are still facing deportation from the US and trials 60 years after their crimes.

The real issue is why, despite the exposure of Kerrey’s participation in a cold-blooded massacre and his subsequent cover-up, there has been so little demand for an investigation. Why has there not been an outcry demanding Kerrey’s removal from his position as president of the New School, an institution known in the past for its democratic and progressive educational tradition?

Following the first revelations, the New School’s board of trustees announced its “unconditional support” for Kerrey, without making the slightest independent inquiry. It has remained silent over the latest

charges by the Vietnamese government and the falsification of the historical record contained in Kerrey’s book.

The closing of ranks around Kerrey by the political establishment—including those who once called themselves liberals and opponents of the US war in Southeast Asia—has profound political significance. The attempt to portray the perpetrator of a war crime as no less a “victim” than those he killed is not the result of sympathy for an individual.

Rather, the ruling elite has seized on the Kerrey case as an opportunity to deal another blow to the legacy of popular opposition to US military aggression, with its horrendous toll on innocent civilians, as well as the wanton sacrifice of American soldiers that became known as the “Vietnam syndrome.”

Moreover, while Kerrey is charged with a single war crime, there are surviving members of the political and military establishment—from Henry Kissinger to General William Westmoreland and former CIA director Richard Helms—who directed massive crimes against humanity and have never been called to account.

With the explosion of US militarism in the wake of September 11, the Kerrey affair assumes even greater political significance. Justifying the crime he carried out—and the countless other atrocities committed more than three decades ago—and attempting to legitimize the US war in Vietnam helps pave the way for new and more horrible slaughters by the US military.

The statement by the Vietnamese government charging Kerrey with “war atrocities” and his attempt in his autobiography to once again cover up his role must serve as a call to action by those students and faculty members at the New School who value historical truth and oppose militarism.

The demand that Kerrey be removed as president of the New School is a necessary measure of social hygiene: allowing a war criminal to serve as the head of a major academic institution only debases the university and pollutes the intellectual atmosphere as a whole.

The campaign for Kerrey’s dismissal, however, must be directed not just at the actions of a single individual. It must be utilized as a means for educating new generations of students, workers and youth on the real lessons of the Vietnam War, and preparing them to oppose new war crimes in Afghanistan, Colombia, Iraq and elsewhere.



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