

The great unmentionable at the Democratic convention: Kerry's antiwar past

David Walsh
30 July 2004

One of the most striking and dishonest features of the Democratic Party convention and nomination of Senator John Kerry this week in Boston has been the concerted effort to excise the moral high point of its presidential candidate's career: his outspoken repudiation of and opposition to the Vietnam war in the early 1970s.

Other than a relatively fleeting reference in the video biography presented Thursday night, which concentrated on his military career, almost no mention was made during four days of the convention of Kerry's antiwar activity.

There is a farcical element to this. Everyone in the Democratic Party hierarchy, every delegate and every member of the media is aware of Kerry's record, but no one can mention it—his career is being “sanitized,” in the eyes of the political and media establishment. What does this falsification of history—that it must deny past opposition to one of the greatest criminal enterprises of the twentieth century—say about the Democratic Party as a whole?

The various glowing tributes paid him at the convention simply skipped over the period during which Kerry actively opposed the Vietnam War in the national political arena.

Headline speakers at the Democratic Party national convention have referred repeatedly to Kerry's record of service in Vietnam, including his various medals. Former Vice President Al Gore told his audience that Kerry “showed uncommon heroism on the battlefield of Vietnam.” Former President Jimmy Carter observed, “When our national security requires military action, John Kerry has already proven in Vietnam that he will not hesitate to act.” New York Sen. Hillary Clinton declared that “we need to take care of our men and women in uniform who, like John Kerry, risk their lives.”

Her husband and former President Bill Clinton waxed pseudo-eloquent on the subject of Kerry's record: “During the Vietnam War, many young men, including the current president, the vice president and me, could have gone to Vietnam and didn't. John Kerry came from a privileged background. He could have avoided going too, but instead, he said: Send me.”

There was no let-up on the second day of the Democratic convention. Sen. Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts referred to Kerry as “a war hero”; Missouri Rep. Dick Gephardt asserted that “John Kerry defended our freedom at the barrel of a gun”; Barack Obama, Democratic candidate for the US Senate from Illinois, gushed about Kerry's “heroic service in Vietnam.” Teresa Heinz Kerry, the candidate's wife, pointedly told the crowd that her husband had “earned his medals the old-fashioned way, by putting his life on the line for his country.”

On July 28 Kerry made his entrance into downtown Boston by ferrying across its harbor in the company of a dozen members of the US navy swift boat he commanded during the Vietnam War. The stunt was intended one more time to remind the public of Kerry's war record and, more generally, to associate him with the military.

That evening the celebration of the military reached new heights with

the unprecedented appearance on the stage of the convention of twelve retired generals and admirals, including two former chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Gen. John M. Shalikashvili and Admiral William J. Crowe), a former NATO Supreme Allied Commander (Gen. Wesley Clark) and a former director of the CIA (Admiral Stansfield Turner). Shalikashvili was given a prominent time-slot for his remarks to the convention.

The same night Democratic vice presidential candidate Sen. John Edwards of North Carolina began his acceptance speech by once again paying tribute to Kerry's military record: “For those who want to know what kind of leader he'll be, I want to take you back about 30 years. When John Kerry graduated college, he volunteered for military service, volunteered to go to Vietnam, volunteered to captain a swift boat, one of the most dangerous duties in Vietnam that you could have. As a result, he was wounded, honored for his valor.”

In preparation for his address to the convention July 29, according to the Bloomberg news service, Kerry was “surrounding himself” with his former crewmates and veterans of the Vietnam War “to make his case that he is qualified to lead the campaign against terrorism and manage the war in Iraq.”

There is an objective logic to politics and to the political atmosphere the Democratic Party has created at its national gathering. Many antiwar Democratic voters and “left” liberals may be telling themselves that the flag-waving glorification of militarism will be jettisoned when and if Kerry takes office, that it is necessary as a campaign tactic to defuse Republican attacks, etc., but they are deluding themselves. The political physiognomy of the next Democratic administration is being prepared at this convention: pro-war, militarist and imperialist.

The Democrats have not openly repudiated Kerry's positions of three decades ago. They still serve a political purpose on occasion. During the primaries last winter, for example, when it was necessary to derail Howard Dean's campaign, Kerry's antiwar credentials were bruited about to improve his image.

In the virtual silence about Kerry's past at this week's convention there is an apparent irony. Democratic officials repeatedly told the press during the run-up to the event that it was their desire to have the American people “get to know” John Kerry, to “humanize” him. And yet for their own present-day reactionary political purposes they have suppressed the most honorable period in his life, the most “human.” Shakespeare's Mark Antony had it that the “evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones.” The Democrats have gone one better—they have buried Kerry's “good” before his demise.

John Kerry served two tours as a lieutenant in the navy in Vietnam between December 1967 and April 1969, when he returned to the US with three Purple Hearts and a Silver Star. He was by this time a vocal opponent of the war. “I was angry about what happened over there, I had clearly concluded how wrong it was,” he told one interviewer. In 1970 Kerry began to participate in the activities of Vietnam Veterans Against

the War (VVAW). At a meeting in January 1971 he proposed an antiwar rally by Vietnam veterans on the Mall in Washington.

The protest, in which some 1,100 veterans participated, took place the week of April 20 in Washington. Kerry, as a representative of the group, testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on April 22, 1971.

There he reported on the findings of a recent VVAW conference on war atrocities. In one of the most oft-quoted sections of his remarks, Kerry told the Senate committee: "They [Vietnam veterans] told the stories of 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."

Kerry continued: "We rationalized destroying villages in order to save them. We saw America lose her sense of morality as she accepted very coolly a My Lai and refused to give up the image of American soldiers who hand out chocolate bars and chewing gum. We learned the meaning of free fire zones, shooting anything that moves, and we watched while America placed a cheapness on the lives of Orientals."

In concluding his remarks, Kerry declared: "We wish that a merciful God could wipe away our own memories of that service as easily as this administration has wiped their memories of us. But all that they have done and all that they can do by this denial is to make more clear than ever our own determination to undertake one last mission, to search out and destroy the last vestige of this barbaric war, to pacify our own hearts, to conquer the hate and the fear that have driven this country these last 10 years and more, and so when, in 30 years from now, our brothers go down the street without a leg, without an arm, or a face, and small boys ask why, we will be able to say 'Vietnam' and not mean a desert, not a filthy obscene memory, but mean instead the place where America finally turned and where soldiers like us helped it in the turning."

On June 30, 1971 Kerry appeared on the Dick Cavett talk show to debate another navy Vietnam veteran, John O'Neill, who was a Nixon administration mouthpiece.

During the debate Kerry addressed the question of US war crimes in Vietnam: "I don't think that any man comes back to this country to say that he raped or to say that he burned a village or to say that he wantonly destroyed crops or something for pleasure. I think that he does it at the risk of certain kinds of punishment, at the risks of injuring his own character which he has to live with, at the risks of the loss of his family and friends as a result of it, and he does it because he believes intensely that people have got to be educated about the devastation of this war.

"We thought we were a moral country, yes, but we are now engaged in the most rampant bombing in the history of mankind. Since President Nixon has assumed office, we have dropped some 2,700,000 tons of bombs on Laos. That is more than we dropped in the entire Pacific and Atlantic theaters in the entire course of World War II."

On the Cavett show Kerry denounced the secret, illegal character of the war conducted by the Nixon administration and its anti-democratic implications: "But for the American people, who are supposedly the people who count in this country, there was no knowledge, and for the American people there was no opportunity to vote on going to this war. The American people, there have repeatedly been few opportunities to bring it to a vote, and only this year finally have we had that kind of vote in congress, and still we cannot get congress to respond to the little people in this country."

Kerry's opposition to the war never went beyond characterizing it as a terrible and tragic policy "mistake" that needed to be corrected, and even

at the time the element of self-promotion in his antiwar activities was recognized by critics, but there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of his remarks.

If the Massachusetts senator has come full circle and now promises to "stay the course" in a blatantly illegal and criminal war, it has something more than personal implications.

In the first place, it expresses the evolution to the right of the Democratic Party and the thorough putrefaction of American liberalism. Kerry's "interment" of his opposition to the Vietnam war is simply one of the most graphic illustrations of a general tendency, the rightward lurch by an entire social milieu. The Democratic Party in 2004 has consolidated itself as a pro-war, pro-"national security" party, which accepts as a given all the premises of the "war on terror," a cover for the drive by US imperialism for global domination.

Moreover, by passing over Kerry's antiwar positions, the Democrats are tacitly attempting to rehabilitate the Vietnam War in the public's perception. An imperialist war that caused the deaths of millions of Southeast Asians and tens of thousands of Americans, that was recognized as a moral abomination and an affront to democratic values by wide layers of the US population, is now being painted in respectable and honorable colors.

But these are questions with the most burning contemporary significance. By generating a super-patriotic climate at its convention and whitewashing the crimes committed by American imperialism in Vietnam, the Democratic Party leadership is consciously aiming to de-legitimize criticism of and opposition to all *future* US military interventions.

By openly embracing militarism, the Democrats are providing a warning of what is to come. The present convention has revealed that on fundamental strategic questions there are no principled differences between the Democrats and Republicans; both parties advocate policies of aggressive expansionism, militarism and the striving for US global hegemony. The divisions, which are serious but tactical, relate to the manner in which these policies should be conducted, with the Democrats concerned about the preservation and shoring up of US imperialism's postwar alliances.

A Kerry administration would carry on the war in Iraq and prepare new interventions. Kerry's party represents a section of the American plutocracy, which, whether it rules through a Republican or Democratic administration, will stop at nothing to defend its social position.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact