

Kerry's dilemma: defending medals from a criminal war

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As the 2004 presidential election contest moves into high gear, the struggle between the Democratic and Republican parties has taken on a surreal character.

US troops are engaged in the most intense combat they have seen in more than three decades. Over 50 of them—and untold hundreds, if not thousands, of Iraqis—have been killed since the beginning of this month alone. Yet the entire debate is now centered on whether the Democratic nominee deserved medals he won for a brief combat engagement on the Mekong River 35 years ago.

This bizarre election controversy has unexpectedly brought my father to mind. He died in 1991, on the 50th anniversary of Pearl Harbor, an event that was to shape his life.

As an American infantryman in Europe, he was awarded the Silver Star and the Bronze Star—the same two medals won by John Kerry, and which have become the focus of a squabble that has plumbed the depths of the American political cesspool.

I don't know if I ever even saw the medals. My father never spoke of them, nor of any other heroic aspect of what he called his "walking tour of Europe." He, like most veterans, considered boasting about such matters cheap and dishonorable.

The few times he shared any memories about the war, they expressed his horror at the waste of human life: indelible images of dead German children and the screams of the wounded left behind on the battlefield in the days before you could call in a medivac helicopter.

He stayed in the army until Vietnam, where he went in the early days, when US troops were still called "advisors." When he returned, he told me, "If you join the military, you're crazy." It was sound advice, and I took it.

He often voiced his distress over the war in Vietnam. It was for him the end of the army as he had known it. The democratic sentiments that animated many of those who went into the Second World War had been dragged through the mud. He left the military in 1968, the same year I first became active in the struggle against the war.

Kerry's current dilemma has undoubtedly dredged up deeply felt emotions for wide layers of the American people, for whom the wounds of Vietnam are still fresh. For an entire generation born afterwards, it has served to sow further confusion over the

war's real political legacy.

Kerry served for a little more than four months in Vietnam, winning the medals now being questioned by the Republican attack dogs. It was what he did after he returned, however, that earned him justifiable notice. Kerry joined with other veterans to demand an end to the US intervention in Southeast Asia. He briefly became their leading spokesman, publicly denouncing war crimes against the Vietnamese people that they themselves had witnessed.

In the midst of another criminal colonial war and in the shadow of fresh US war crimes against a civilian population, Kerry and the Democrats have worked assiduously to bury this, the worthiest, episode in his political life.

Instead, they have cast the Democratic nominee as a "war hero," highlighting his brief exploits in the Mekong Delta and surrounding him with his former Swift boat crew and other veterans. Kerry is endlessly described as a "man who knows how to defend his country," even though he publicly insisted at the time that it was the Vietnamese liberation fighters who were defending *their* country.

The Democratic convention in Boston last month took on the air of a national celebration of American militarism. Kerry introduced himself with the military salutation, "Reporting for duty." Suddenly, the medals that he at least feigned to have thrown over the White House fence more than 30 years ago acquired a new importance.

This is not a personal matter. The Democrats chose to contest this election by insisting they will be even stronger in the department that the Republicans had claimed as their own—"national security." Turning their backs upon the many millions of Americans who oppose the war in Iraq and want US troops brought home, they have waged a campaign aimed first and foremost at winning the confidence of the US ruling elite.

Attacking Bush largely from the right, they argue that Kerry would be a better manager of the Iraqi occupation, and better able to impose the kind of sacrifices upon the American people that this and future wars will require. The Democrats have explicitly rejected any cut in military spending, demanded an expansion of the standing army, and criticized the current administration for not imposing "homeland security" with sufficient vigor.

Kerry's experience as an aggressive Swift boat helmsman, the Democratic campaign has asserted, demonstrates his fitness to assume the mantle of "commander-in-chief" and prosecute Washington's drive for global hegemony under the cover of a never-ending "war on terror."

Enter "Swift Boat Veterans for Truth," a loathsome lie machine put together by a collection of ultra-right-wingers, Texas bagmen for the Republican National Committee and Bush, and specialists in media manipulation. The group first aired a commercial that featured other Swift boat veterans claiming that Kerry lied about the incident for which he received his medals and faked his combat wounds. A number of these individuals have themselves been exposed as liars, impeached by praise they had for Kerry as recently as 1996.

This smear campaign has created what would seem an improbable scenario. Kerry, who went to Vietnam and then opposed the war, has been placed on the defensive about his military record. Those orchestrating the attack are Bush, who pulled family strings to avoid the draft by entering the National Guard—remaining largely AWOL—and Cheney, who obtained five separate deferments from military service. Both supported the war politically, but were content to let others do the fighting and dying. As Cheney put it, they had "other priorities" at the time.

After trying to ignore the attacks for weeks, Kerry has mounted a counter-offensive, denouncing the group's ads and appropriately laying blame for them at the door of the White House. Others have been brought forward to defend the Democratic nominee's war record.

With military precision, the Swift boat veterans' front has shifted its line of attack, airing a new commercial beginning today that condemns Kerry for his 1971 testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, in which he exposed the atrocities inflicted by American imperialism upon Vietnam.

Kerry's situation begins to resemble the old slapstick comedy routine in which the hapless hero is hit by the swinging door both coming and going. After first goading him into a defensive position on his military record in Vietnam, Kerry's attackers now raise the obvious question: "Why is he claiming to be a hero in a war he denounced as a crime?"

For this, the Kerry campaign has no answer, because it is founded on a deliberate and monumental lie. In selling Kerry as a commander-in-chief, the Democrats have sought to rehabilitate the Vietnam War, portraying it as a noble struggle to defend America and democracy.

This war, which claimed the lives of millions of Vietnamese and tens of thousands of American youth, was widely recognized as the criminal colonialist enterprise that Kerry branded it at the time. Millions, both in the US and internationally, took to the streets to demand an end to the US intervention, and anti-war sentiments were widespread within the Democratic Party itself, from the debacle of the 1968 convention through to the final withdrawal from Vietnam

nearly seven years later.

The radical change in the party's evaluation of the past is driven by the events of the present. Committed to continuing the colonial venture in Iraq, the Democrats are compelled to cover up not only the ugly reality of the Vietnam War, but their own previous attitude towards it. By repudiating this past, they are signaling their readiness to squelch all opposition to the Iraq war and to the wars of aggression still to come.

The Kerry camp is doubly vulnerable to the present smear campaign because it cannot answer back by stating the obvious: the Bush camp's lies about the Democratic nominee's military record are being used as a smokescreen to obscure the ongoing debacle in Iraq.

There are those in the "anybody but Bush" camp who still reassure themselves with the belief that the Democrats' pro-war policy is merely a campaign ploy, a regrettable but necessary tactic to win votes from the Republicans. Once the election is over, according to these self-deluded elements, Kerry will be free to show his true liberal colors.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Kerry's embrace of the Iraq war, just as his attempt to rehabilitate the intervention in Vietnam, is an accurate barometer of the continuous lurch to the right by the Democrats over a whole historical period.

Like the Republicans, the Democratic Party is a political instrument of big business, and it will not be pressured into serving the interests of working people. The fight against war and for social equality can be advanced only through a decisive break with the entire two-party system and the struggle to build a new, mass independent socialist party. That is the historic task that the Socialist Equality Party is advancing through its intervention in the 2004 election.

As the Swift boat veterans' ploy unfolds, I cannot help wondering what my father would have made of it. No doubt we would have argued about its broader implications. He was not a socialist, though he certainly played a role in my becoming one.

Despite our divergent political perspectives, there are some things about the present campaign upon which we would have agreed. I am confident that he would have been revolted by the criminal methods of the Bush campaign, and would have viewed with well-founded disdain the attempt to cast Kerry as the "hero" of Vietnam.



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