McCain and Vietnam: Revising history to pave the way for new wars

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The Republican Party's presumptive candidate for president, Senator John McCain of Arizona, is routinely referred to in the US media as a "Vietnam War hero." In speech after speech over the past month, his Democratic rival, Senator Barack Obama, has prefaced criticism of McCain's policies with a declaration of his belief that the Republican is "a genuine war hero," "a man who has served this country heroically" and "an American hero whose military service we honor."

While conventional political wisdom would no doubt dismiss such rhetoric as, on the one hand, the packaging of the candidate by the Republicans and, on the other, a tactical feint on the part of a Democratic candidate lacking in military experience, the words have a far deeper and more ominous political significance.

What is the objective source of McCain's designation as a "war hero," a title that he parlayed into a successful political career bankrolled by the family fortune of his second wife and abetted by the corrupt Arizona developer Charles Keating?

McCain, the son and grandson of four-star Navy admirals, was nearly a decade into a rather undistinguished career as a Navy pilot when he was shot down over North Vietnam in October 1967, landing him for the next five and a half years in a Vietnamese prisoner of war camp.

Before his plane went down, he had spent about 20 hours in combat in the skies over Vietnam, dropping high explosives on the towns and people below during short flights from an American aircraft carrier parked in the South China Sea.

He had volunteered to participate in an operation known as "Rolling Thunder" launched by the Democratic administration of President Lyndon Johnson in an attempt to break the will of the Vietnamese people. The aim was to use sustained bombing to destroy the country's economy and infrastructure and kill or maim large numbers of its citizens.

Before the war was over, US warplanes dropped close to eight million tons of explosives—four times the bombs dropped in all of World War II—on a country roughly the size of New Mexico. This, the most intense and sustained bombing campaign in history, devastated Vietnam's cities and destroyed its industrial, transportation and communications infrastructure.

Before the war was over, some five million Vietnamese were killed, many of them victims of US aerial bombardments.

In his book *Vietnam: A History*, veteran journalist Stanley Karnow presents the account given by a Vietnamese peasant of one bombing raid: "The bombing started at about eight o'clock in the morning and lasted for hours. When we first heard the explosions, we rushed into the tunnels but not everyone made it. When there was a pause in the attack, some of us climbed out to see what we could do, and the scene was terrifying. Bodies had been torn to pieces—limbs were hanging from trees and scattered around the ground. The bombing began again, this time with napalm, and the village went up in flames. The napalm hit me. I felt as if I was burning all over, like a piece of coal. I lost consciousness. Friends took me to the hospital, and my wounds didn't begin to heal until six months later. Over 200 people died in the raid, including my mother, sister-in-law and three nephews. They were buried alive when the tunnel collapsed."

What is described here is not an act of heroism, but a war crime carried out by what was militarily the most powerful nation on earth against an impoverished and historically oppressed country.

When McCain was shot down, he was completing such a bombing run against a power plant in a heavily populated area of Hanoi.

McCain's survival after parachuting into Hanoi is testimony to the humanity of the Vietnamese people and was owed in particular to one Vietnamese worker who swam into the lake where the wounded pilot had landed, pulled him out before he drowned and then protected him from an enraged crowd.

One can only imagine the reaction if a foreign pilot—whose own country was never attacked—were to parachute into Phoenix or any other US city or town after bombing raids that had torn men, women and children to pieces and reduced homes to rubble.

In a 1997 interview on the CBS news program "60 Minutes," McCain frankly acknowledged, "I am a war criminal; I bombed innocent women and children." It was an honest statement, though hardly a convincing argument for making him president.

The fact that he was a war criminal reflected not merely his own personal actions, which in terms of slaughter were no doubt every bit as devastating as a My Lai massacre, albeit inflicted from a longer distance. Rather it was a matter of the objective character of the war itself. Clearly there were many in the top echelons of the government, its military and intelligence agencies and in both major parties who bore far greater responsibility for the waging of a criminal and counterrevolutionary war of aggression in Vietnam.

The American ruling establishment has spent more than three decades attempting to revise the history of the Vietnam War in order to conceal its own responsibility for the greatest war crimes since the fall of the Nazis and to erase the political memory of US

imperialism's defeat under conditions of mass opposition and social struggles at home.

Kicking the "Vietnam syndrome" has been the stated aim within the ruling elite at least since the first Bush administration. It was hoped that the first Persian Gulf War and then the invasion of Iraq would somehow sweep aside the popular aversion to US wars of aggression that was the bitter legacy of Vietnam.

McCain's admission in 1997 notwithstanding, his lionization as a war hero has very much been a part of this effort. Meanwhile, his own conceptions about the Vietnam war have played a decisive role in shaping his attitudes towards Iraq and a potential new war against Iran.

An article published in the *New York Times* Sunday, based on an essay written by McCain in 1974 while attending the National War College approximately a year after his release, provided fresh insight into the lessons drawn by McCain from his grueling and formative experience in Vietnam. While many officers concluded that the US should have never sent combat forces into Vietnam, McCain's essay "focused on the failure to sustain public support for the fight," according to the *Times*.

He criticized fellow POWs who "questioned the legality of the war" as being "easy marks for Communist propaganda" and blamed "divisive forces" in the US itself.

As an antidote, he proposed a more intensive indoctrination of US troops in the foreign policy aims of the government—while admitting that "a program of this nature could be construed as 'brainwashing'"—and a more aggressive attempt by the government to acquaint the American people with "some basic facts of its foreign policy."

Of course, millions of Americans—including many in the military—"questioned the legality of the war" because it was in fact a criminal war of aggression. Moreover, American working people were not prepared to continue paying the price for this war, which killed some 60,000 troops and left hundreds of thousands more physically and mentally shattered. Meanwhile, people all over the world regarded the war as a crime and a moral disgrace.

A number of naval and air force pilots, however, drew different conclusions about the war. Most prominent among them was Gen. Curtis LeMay, the former Air Force chief of staff, who chafed at any restrictions on the air war against the Vietnamese and suggested that the US "bomb them back into the stone age." These elements were highly critical of the Johnson administration at the outset of the Rolling Thunder campaign, believing that the US needed to carry out the unrelenting carpet bombing of Vietnamese cities. They praised Nixon for unleashing 200 B-52 bombers on Hanoi in the so-called Christmas Bombings of 1972, an atrocity that failed to break the will of the Vietnamese people and paved the way to the withdrawal of American forces from the country.

McCain has described his term at the National War College, when he wrote his essay, as the period when his "principles were grounded" on issues of war and foreign policy. His basic conclusion was that the US could have won the Vietnam War had it pursued a different military strategy and not succumbed to the influence of "divisive forces," in which he includes the antiwar movement, the media and the Democratic Party.

McCain's rewriting of the history of Vietnam is by no means unique. It has been a major ideological campaign for decades, finding its expression in such popular culture products as the *Rambo* films. Its ultimate purpose is to pave the way to new US wars of aggression such as the one in Iraq—where McCain has said that he would have no problem keeping US troops for 100 years—and Iran, where he expressed his view by singing "bomb, bomb, bomb ... bomb, bomb Iran" to the music of an old Beach Boys tune.

The Democratic Party's aiding and abetting of this ideological campaign also did not just begin with the obsequious praise of McCain as a "war hero." For decades, the party has recoiled in fear from the charge of the right that its antiwar wing was responsible for US imperialism's defeat.

It is worth noting that the Republicans meanwhile have shown no compunction about attacking rival candidates' war records. In 2004, they formed the "Swiftboat Veterans for Truth" not only to vilify Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry for having opposed the war upon his return from Vietnam, but to question whether the battle for which Kerry was awarded the Silver Star ever took place.

For their part, Kerry and the Democrats did their best to bury the candidate's campaign against the war of more than 30 years before, presenting him as a "war hero" who knew "how to defend his country."

The effect of this campaign rhetoric—like the Democrats' continuous "honoring" of McCain's military record today—was to help rehabilitate the Vietnam War.

This attempted rehabilitation is founded not on any new insights into the past, but is rather predicated on the hope that searing memories have faded and that a new generation is less familiar with the terrible events of that war.

In the end, this historical revisionism, practiced by both the Democrats and Republicans, is driven by a consensus within the ruling elite—whatever the tactical disagreements on how best to salvage their interests in Iraq. They agree that the defense of American imperialism's strategic position will require new and even more terrible war crimes.

This is no less true of Obama—who has described Afghanistan as a "war we must win," proposed unilateral attacks on Pakistan, and called for a larger army—than it is of John McCain.

Under these conditions, and with American working people once again confronting both intense social struggles at home and war abroad, the defense of the real history of US imperialism's defeat in Vietnam becomes all the more vital.