

New York Times columnist Roger Cohen defends war criminal Kerrey

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The appointment of Robert Kerrey, the former Nebraska senator responsible for a massacre of civilians as a Navy SEAL during the Vietnam War, to chair the newly-founded, US government-backed Fulbright University of Vietnam, is an outrageously provocative move.

Kerrey was the head of a squad of SEALs, nicknamed “Kerrey’s raiders,” which rounded up and executed 20 civilians, mostly women and children, in the village of Thanh Phong in 1969. Kerrey’s team had been sent to the village to assassinate the local mayor, who was suspected of Viet Cong sympathies, as part of a secret CIA assassination program known as Operation Phoenix.

The unit reported all those killed as “Viet Cong” guerrillas, and Kerrey received a Bronze Star for this supposed military feat. He remained silent about the real nature of massacre for over 30 years, until his role was uncovered by a *New York Times* report in 2001, shortly before his appointment as president of the New School in New York City, one of the most prestigious university posts in the country. The announcement of his appointment provoked mass opposition from students, outraged over the prospect of a war criminal heading their school.

Today, Kerrey routinely claims remorse for his role in the killings and claims that it was a transformative event in his life. However, before his cover had been blown by the *Times* report, Kerrey had parlayed his reputation as a “war hero” into a political career as governor of Nebraska, followed by two terms in the US Senate and a presidential bid in 1992. To this day, Kerrey denies that he and his squad summarily executed unarmed Vietnamese civilians, as suggested by testimony both from survivors and former members of his unit. He claims that the SEALs only began shooting after being fired upon, and that the deaths of the villagers were an unfortunate consequence of the “fog of war.”

When Kerrey’s appointment to head the first American

university in Vietnam provoked outrage among the Vietnamese population, *New York Times* columnist Roger Cohen leapt to Kerrey’s defense in a column headlined “Kerrey’s Vietnam Dilemma.” It is a devastating self-exposure of Cohen himself and of the political role of the *New York Times* in general.

Along with other *Times* columnists such as Nicholas Kristof, Cohen has become something of an expert in using just this type of atrocity to justify military interventions in countries targeted by US imperialism. The *Times* editorial staff as a whole plays a central role in the mobilization of such phony “human rights” rhetoric in order to overcome popular opposition to the wars of US imperialism.

Cohen first made a name for himself as a *Times* correspondent in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, where he played a leading role in justifying US intervention in the Bosnian civil war, followed by the 1999 NATO air war against Serbia. He portrayed first Bosnian Muslims, then ethnic Kosovars, as the helpless victims of Serbian military violence, playing the role of the Jews to Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic’s Hitler. This was a gross distortion of the complex social and political crisis produced by the break-up of Yugoslavia, a catastrophe whose driving forces were US and German imperialism.

In his role as a *Times* columnist, Cohen has been particularly brazen and cynical in his beating of war drums for US intervention in Syria, Libya and Ukraine, combining demands for stepped-up US air strikes and troop deployments with hysterical denunciations of the political leaders of these countries.

In a recent column fulminating against perceived unwillingness of Western governments to commit sufficient military resources to the war against ISIS, Cohen laments, “There has been a lot of discussion of the origins of ISIS, of the complexity of defeating it, of its

digital slickness, but little of its pure evil—its desecration of human life and its exaltation of death (even delivered by children). To dwell on the group's iniquity—its contempt for humanity—would be to suggest the necessity of its immediate extirpation; and no Western government wants to deploy soldiers to do that. That is a moral capitulation, whatever else it may be.”

When the perpetrator of such a slaughter happens to be an American, and a former US senator at that, the tune suddenly changes. Now, Cohen is filled with sympathy for the devil, a deep regret that such an unfortunate calamity could have happened to an otherwise decent and honorable figure. He cites Kerrey's self-serving claims of regret as sufficient reason to exonerate him from any responsibility.

Avoiding details wherever possible and making deft use of the passive voice to avoid assigning responsibility, Cohen writes, “Lives can turn in an instant. For former Senator Bob Kerrey, that moment came on Feb. 25, 1969, when, as a young lieutenant in the Navy SEALs, he led his squad into the Vietnamese village of Thanh Phong. By the time [Kerrey's squad] withdrew, 20 civilians had been slaughtered, including 13 children, according to survivors.”

After credulously citing Kerrey's guilty feelings, Cohen claims that this supposed mental anguish motivated the former SEAL commander to make amends through public service. “Kerrey went to work to build a special relationship between the United States and Vietnam. He was an early advocate of the normalization through which many wounds have healed. Trade has flourished,” Cohen continues: “One area in which Kerrey has worked hard is education, both as senator and later as president of the New School in New York.”

The crowning result of this “reconciliation,” as Cohen calls it, was the “rapturous reception” which the Vietnamese Stalinist regime gave last month to Barack Obama, the current commander-in-chief of the imperialist power that slaughtered three million Vietnamese, during an official state visit last month. Far from being a victory for peace and “reconciliation,” the Stalinists rolled out the red carpet for Obama in large measure because of the administration's support of their territorial claims against China, as part of the construction of an anti-China military alliance throughout the region.

Cohen writes, “In every war I have covered, from Beirut to Bosnia, I have listened to men (always men) recount moments that left shame — the terrorizing of a child in a quest for intelligence, the abandonment of a son

encircled by the enemy. More than one million innocent Vietnamese civilians were killed; Kerrey's story is one of many.” He continues: “We were not there in the heat, in the night, in that tension, with that responsibility. I listen to Kerrey and think: There but for the grace of God go I.”

This admission is worth pondering. Cohen identifies, not with the innocent victims, but with the perpetrator of a monstrous crime. He can see himself doing something similar—cutting the throat of an old man, tossing a hand grenade into a hut, gunning down a small child. In practice, over several decades, that has been his role, albeit as a cheerleader for American cutthroats, rather than the one actually wielding the knife.

Cohen's apologetics reach a nauseating crescendo of hypocrisy and self-righteousness towards the end of the article. Kerrey's appointment, he writes, means that the massacre of Vietnamese civilians must be lived through again—by Kerrey! “To go through this pain again (“Part of me wants to run away from it,” he told me) is a gauge of Kerrey's commitment. It is brave,” Cohen declares.

As for the relatives of the victims of the bloodbath in Vietnam, well, they had just better get over it. “The elevation of peace over grievance involves wrestling with impossible moral dilemmas. Acceptance that there is no wholly satisfactory answer is part of moving forward,” Cohen lectures.

In other conflicts, Cohen has argued that there should be no statute of limitations for war crimes. As always, this comes with the unstated exception: unless those crimes were committed by the United States.



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