

Vietnam War Veteran John Kerry's Testimony Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, April 22, 1971

Editorial Notes by Dr. Ernest Bolt, University of Richmond

By April 1971, with at least seven legislative proposals relating to the Vietnam war under consideration, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee chaired by Senator William Fulbright (Democrat-Arkansas) began to hear testimony. On the third day of hearings, six members of the committee heard comments by John Kerry, a leader of the major veterans organization opposing continuation of the war. Kerry was the only representative of Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) who testified on April 22, but others in VVAW were in the audience and at times supported his remarks with applause.

The committee began the hearing April 20 and continued to receive testimony for four days in April and for seven days throughout May, 1971. The full testimony heard by the committee, including that of Kerry, is in *Legislative Proposals Relating to the War in Southeast Asia, Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, Ninety-Second Congress, First Session (April—May 1971)*, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1971. Subject breaks in Kerry's testimony were provided by the Senate staff in the form of subtitles, which in some cases are retained below. Additional editorial notes are provided by Professor Bolt. Excerpts from Kerry's testimony are from pages 180, 181–183, 184, 185, 195, 204, and 208.

Statement of Mr. John Kerry

...I am not here as John Kerry. I am here as one member of the group of 1,000 which is a small representation of a very much larger group of veterans in this country, and were it possible for all of them to sit at this table they would be here and have the same kind of testimony[...].

WINTER SOLDIER INVESTIGATION

I would like to talk, representing all those veterans, and say that several months ago in Detroit, we had an investigation at which over 150 honorably discharged and many very highly

decorated veterans testified to war crimes committed in Southeast Asia, not isolated incidents but crimes committed on a day-to-day basis with the full awareness of officers at all levels of command[...].

They told the stories at 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 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.

We call this investigation the "Winter Soldier Investigation." The term "Winter Soldier" is a play on words of Thomas Paine in 1776 when he spoke of the Sunshine Patriot and summertime soldiers who deserted at Valley Forge because the going was rough.

We who have come here to Washington have come here because we feel we have to be winter soldiers now. We could come back to this country; we could be quiet; we could hold our silence; we could not tell what went on in Vietnam, but we feel because of what threatens this country, the fact that the crimes threaten it, not reds, and not redcoats but the crimes which we are committing that threaten it, that we have to speak out.

FEELINGS OF MEN COMING BACK FROM VIETNAM

...In our opinion, and from our experience, there is nothing in South Vietnam, nothing which could happen that realistically threatens the United States of America. And to attempt to justify the loss of one American life in Vietnam, Cambodia, or Laos by linking such loss to the preservation of freedom, which those misfits supposedly abuse, is to us the height of criminal hypocrisy, and it is that kind of hypocrisy which we feel has torn this country apart[...].

WHAT WAS FOUND AND LEARNED IN VIETNAM

We found that not only was it a civil war, an effort by a people who had for years been seeking their liberation from any colonial influence whatsoever, but also we found that the Vietnamese whom we had enthusiastically molded after our own image were hard put to take up the fight against the threat we were supposedly saving them from.

We found most people didn't even know the difference between communism and democracy. They only wanted to work in rice paddies without helicopters strafing them and bombs with

napalm burning their villages and tearing their country apart. They wanted everything to do with the war, particularly with this foreign presence of the United States of America, to leave them alone in peace, and they practiced the art of survival by siding with whichever military force was present at a particular time, be it Vietcong, North Vietnamese, or American.

We found also that all too often American men were dying in those rice paddies for want of support from their allies. We saw first hand how money from American taxes was used for a corrupt dictatorial regime. We saw that many people in this country had a one-sided idea of who was kept free by our flag, as blacks provided the highest percentage of casualties. We saw Vietnam ravaged equally by American bombs as well as by search and destroy missions, as well as by Vietcong terrorism, and yet we listened while this country tried to blame all of the havoc on the Viet Cong.

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.

We watched the U.S. falsification of body counts, in fact the glorification of body counts. We listened while month after month we were told the back of the enemy was about to break. We fought using weapons against "oriental human beings," with quotation marks around that. We fought using weapons against those people which I do not believe this country would dream of using were we fighting in the European theater, or let us say a non-third-world people theater, and so we watched while men charged up hills because a general said that hill has to be taken, and after losing one platoon or two platoons they marched away to leave the high for the reoccupation by the North Vietnamese because we watched pride allow the most unimportant of battles to be blown into extravaganzas, because we couldn't lose, and we couldn't retreat, and because it didn't matter how many American bodies were lost to prove that point. And so there were Hamburger Hills and Khe Sanhs and Hill 881's and Fire Base 6's and so many others.

VIETNAMIZATION

Now we are told that the men who fought there must watch quietly while American lives are lost so that we can exercise the incredible arrogance of Vietnamizing the Vietnamese[...].

Each day to facilitate the process by which the United States washes her hands of Vietnam, someone has to give up his life so that the United States doesn't have to admit something that the entire world already knows, so that we can't say they we have made a mistake. Someone has to die so that President Nixon won't be, and these are his words, "the first President to lose a war."

We are asking Americans to think about that because how do you ask a man to be the last man to die in Vietnam? How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake? But we are trying to do that, and we are doing it with thousands of rationalizations, and if you read carefully the President's last speech to the people of this country, you can see that he says and says clearly:

But the issue, gentlemen, the issue is communism, and the question is whether or not we will leave that country to the Communists or whether or not we will try to give it hope to be a free people.

But the point is they are not a free people now under us. They are not a free people, and we cannot fight communism all over the world, and I think we should have learned that lesson by now[...].

REQUEST FOR ACTION BY CONGRESS

We are asking here in Washington for some action, action from the Congress of the United States of America which as the power to raise and maintain armies, and which by the Constitution also has the power to declare war.

We have come here, not to the President, because we believe that this body can be responsive to the will of the people, and we believe that the will of the people says that we should be out of Vietnam now[...].

WHERE IS THE LEADERSHIP?

We are also here to ask, and we are here to ask vehemently, where are the leaders of our country? Where is the leadership? We are here to ask, "Where are McNamara, Rostow, Bundy, Gilpatric, and so many others?" Where are they now that we, the men whom they sent off to war, have returned? These are commanders who have deserted their troops, and there is no more serious crime in the law of war. The Army says they never leave their wounded.

The Marines say they never leave even their dead. These men have left all the casualties and retreated behind a pious shield of public rectitude. They have left the real stuff of their reputations bleaching behind them in the sun in this country[...].

Editorial Note: Concluding his formal statement, Kerry commented about administration attempts to disown veterans and looked forward thirty years (to 2001) when the nation could look back proudly to a time when it turned from this war and the hate and fears driving us in Vietnam.

Following his formal testimony, the committee members questioned him during their discussion of some of the legislative proposals under consideration. In the course of this discussion, Kerry spoke with considerable familiarity and understanding about disengagement and withdrawal proposals being considered. In response to a question from Senator Aiken, Kerry endorsed "extensive reparations to the people of Indochina" as a "very definite obligation" of the U.S. (p. 191).

Kerry also commented on growth of American opposition to the war, the actions of Lt. Calley at My Lai, and strategic implications of the war.

...It is my opinion that the United States is still reacting in very much the 1945 mood and post-war cold-war period when we reacted to the forces which were at work in World War II and came out of it with this paranoia about the Russians and how the world was going to be divided up between the superpowers, and the foreign policy of John Foster Dulles which was responsible for the creation of the SEATO treaty, which was, in fact, a direct reaction to this so-called Communist monolith. And I think we are reacting under cold-war precepts which are no longer applicable.

I say that because so long as we have the kind of strike force we have, and I am not party to the secret statistics which you gentlemen have here, but as long as we have the ones which we of the public know we have, I think we have a strike force of such capability and I think we have a strike force simply in our Polaris submarines, in the 62 or some Polaris submarines, which are constantly roaming around under the sea. And I know as a Navy man that underwater detection is the hardest kind in the world, and they have not perfected it, that we have the ability to destroy the human race. Why do we have to, therefore, consider and keep considering threats?

At any time that an actual threat is posed to this country or to the security and freedom I will be one of the first people to pick up a gun and defend it, but right now we are reacting with paranoia at this question of peace and the people taking over the world. I think if we are ever

going to get down to the question of dropping those bombs, most of us in my generation simply don't want to be alive afterwards because of the kind of world that it would be with mutations and the genetic probabilities of freaks and everything else.

Therefore, I think it is ridiculous to assume we have to play this power game based on total warfare. I think there will be guerrilla wars and I think we must have a capability to fight those. And we may have to fight them somewhere based on legitimate threats, but we must learn, in this country, how to define those threats and that is what I would say to the question of world peace. I think it is bogus, totally artificial. There is no threat. The Communists are not about to take over our McDonald hamburger stands. [Laughter.][...].

Editorial Note: Kerry's exchange with the senators consumed two complete hours, ranging from earlier French experiences in Indochina to the status of the war in 1971. Kerry faulted the electronic press for failure to report a recent antiwar conference because of its lack of "visual" appeal and entertainment value. He also cited the "exorbitant" power of the Executive branch, faulting Congress.

In response to Senator Symington's inquiry about American men and women still in Vietnam and their attitude toward opposition to the war within Congress, Kerry offered the following comments.

...I don't want to get into the game of saying I represent everybody over there, but let me try to say as straightforwardly as I can, we had an advertisement, ran full page, to show you what the troops read. It ran in Playboy and the response to it within two and a half weeks from Vietnam was 1,200 members. We received initially about 50 to 80 letters a day from troops arriving at our New York office. Some of these letters—and I wanted to bring some down, I didn't know we were going to be testifying here and I can make them available to you—are very, very moving, some of them written by hospital corpsmen on things, on casualty report sheets which say, you know, "Get us out of here." "You are the only hope he have got." "You have got to get us back; it is crazy." We received recently 80 members of the 101st Airborne signed up in one letter. Forty members from a helicopter assault squadron, crash and rescue mission signed up in another one.

I think they are expressing, some of these troops, solidarity with us, right now by wearing black armbands and Vietnam Veterans Against the War buttons. They want to come out and I think they are looking at the people who want to try to get them out as a help.

However, I do recognize there are some men who are in the military for life. The job in the military is to fight wars. When they have a war to fight, they are just as happy in a sense, and I am sure that these men feel they are being stabbed in the back. But, at the same time, I think to most of them the realization of the emptiness, the hollowness, the absurdity of Vietnam has finally hit home, and I feel if they did come home the recrimination would certainly not come from the right, from the military. I don't think there would be that problem[...].

Editorial Note: Kerry returned to the theme of the mood of troops in Vietnam and back home as he concluded his testimony.

...You see the mind is changing over there and a search and destroy mission is a search and avoid mission, and troops don't—you know, like that revolt that took place that was mentioned in the New York Times when they refused to go in after a piece of dead machinery, because it doesn't have any value. They are making their own judgments.

There is a GI movement in this country now as well as over there, and soon these people, these men, who are prescribing wars for these young men to fight are going to find out they are going to have to find some other men to fight them because we are going to change prescriptions. They are going to have to change doctors, because we are not going to fight for them. that is what they are going to realize. There is now a more militant attitude even within the military itself[...].

Editorial Note: Later as Democratic senator from Massachusetts, John Kerry joined 61 others in favor of a nonbinding resolution to lift the U.S. trade embargo against Vietnam. The original embargo began against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1964 and extended to the united Socialist Republic of Vietnam in April 1975. Following the non-binding senate resolution, President Clinton repealed the embargo 4 February 1994.

Reference: Bolt, E. (Ed.). (n.d.). *Vietnam war veteran John Kerry's testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, April 22, 1971*. Retrieved from <https://facultystaff.richmond.edu/%7Eebolt/history398/JohnKerryTestimony.html>