

28-2 | Vietnam Vet Questions America's War in Asia

JOHN KERRY, *Testimony Before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations* (1971)

By the time John Kerry testified before Congress as the representative of Vietnam Veterans for Peace in April 1971, the United States had been involved in that Asian conflict for more than a decade. Nothing so divided the American public as the Vietnam War, especially in its last years when protests erupted on college campuses and war weariness had set in even among those who had supported the war as an effort to turn back the spread of communism. Here, Kerry challenges those who would continue a war whose ill effects he describes in stark detail.

In 1970 at West Point Vice President Agnew said "some glamorize the criminal misfits of society while our best men die in Asian rice paddies to preserve the freedom which most of those misfits abuse," and this was used as a rallying point for our effort in Vietnam. But for us, as boys in Asia whom the country was

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supposed to support, his statement is a terrible distortion from which we can only draw a very deep sense of revulsion, and hence the anger of some of the men who are here in Washington today. It is a distortion because we in no way consider ourselves the best men of this country; because those he calls misfits were standing up for us in a way that nobody else in this country dared to; because so many who have died would have returned to this country to join the misfits in their efforts to ask for an immediate withdrawal from South Vietnam; because so many of those best men have returned as quadriplegics and amputees—and they lie forgotten in Veterans Administration hospitals in this country which fly the flag which so many have chosen as their own personal symbol—and we cannot consider ourselves America's best men when we are ashamed of and hated what we were called on to do in Southeast Asia.

In our opinion, and from our experience, there is nothing in South Vietnam 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. . . .

We are probably angriest about all that we were told about Vietnam and about the mystical war against communism. 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 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 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 Vietcong. We rationalized destroying villages in order to save them. We saw America lose her sense of morality as she accepted very coolly a My Lai¹ 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 United States' 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 [with] weapons against those people which I do not believe this country would dream of using were we

¹**My Lai:** Massacre of Vietnamese civilians by U.S. Army soldiers on March 16, 1968, in the hamlet of My Lai in the central coastal region of Vietnam. Lt. William Calley was the only U.S. soldier convicted for the incident. His life sentence was commuted, and he served house arrest for three and a half years.

fighting in the European theater. 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 hill for reoccupation by the North Vietnamese. We watched pride allow the most unimportant 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 Khesahns and Hill 81's and Fire Base 6's² and so many others.

And 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 that 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?

READING AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Evaluate Kerry's point of view concerning the United States's policy in Vietnam. To what does he attribute the problems with American policy toward Vietnam?
2. According to Kerry, what effect was the war having on American society? On American soldiers?
3. What role does Kerry say race played in shaping America's policies in Southeast Asia? How, for instance, does he explain My Lai and the bombing campaigns?