The New York Times | http://nyti.ms/1TTclzn

The Opinion Pages | OP-ED COLUMNIST

Kerrey's Vietnam Dilemma

Roger Cohen JUNE 7, 2016

HO CHI MINH CITY, Vietnam — 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 they withdrew, 20 civilians had been slaughtered, including 13 children, according to survivors.

"It haunted me from the moment we pulled out of the area," Kerrey told me in a telephone conversation. "I knew we had done something wrong. I did not walk away saying that was great. It did not go away. But if you don't adjust you end your life, and we are talking, so I did not end my life."

In fact, 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. The rapturous reception extended last month to President Obama — the warmest accorded by any nation during his presidency, as he confided to an American diplomat — was a measure of an almost miraculous reconciliation.

One area in which Kerrey has worked hard is education, both as senator and later as president of the New School in New York. For many years he helped to raise

money for a project Obama announced: the opening of the Fulbright University Vietnam, the first such private institution in the country. Financed in part by the U.S. Congress, the school will accept its first students next year. Kerrey has been named chairman of the board.

The appointment has ignited a storm. From cafes to Facebook a debate rages on whether Kerrey is fit to head the university. Some people say that, whatever his contrition, his admission that he ordered the killing in cold blood of Vietnamese women and children disqualifies him. (Whether Kerrey himself killed civilians is still disputed.)

Kerrey was awarded a Bronze Star after his unit falsely reported that it had killed 21 Vietcong guerrillas. For more than 30 years he kept silent until The New York Times and CBS News were about to publish a joint investigation in 2001.

I asked Kerrey if all his efforts on behalf of Vietnam had a redemptive purpose. He said the episode and his work were "a double helix," inseparable from each other. I asked him about his long silence. "For a soldier in a war," he said, "to keep silent is not an anomaly but a rule." I asked him about the medal. "I have never worn it," he said, "and the anger would not end if I mailed it back to the Department of Defense."

It is human — in fact it is uniquely human — to seek redemption. The crime begets a reproachful whisper that will not be stilled. 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. 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.

"I don't believe in redemption," Kerrey told me. "Do good deeds undo a bad deed? I don't think that. You cannot change your past. You can only change the future."

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. I understand Pham Thuy Huong

of Hanoi, who wrote on Facebook, “I cannot look at his face.” I listen to Kerrey and think also of Bui Van Vat, a 65-year-old grandfather whose throat was slit, survivors said. 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.

Sign Up for the Opinion Today Newsletter

Every weekday, get thought-provoking commentary from Op-Ed columnists, the Times editorial board and contributing writers from around the world.

Enter your email addres

Receive occasional updates and special offers for The New York Times's products and services.

I'm not a robot

reCAPTCHA

Privacy - Terms

See Sample

Manage Email Preferences

Privacy Policy

Nguyen Ngoc Chu, a mathematician, suggested in a statement supporting Kerrey that there were valuable lessons in the discussion for the university’s first students: that every judgment requires historical context; that successful people live for the future rather than in past hatreds.

Certainly, this unusually vigorous and open debate is an example of what the university should embody in a country under one-party rule. As Ben Wilkinson, the executive director of the Trust for University Innovation in Vietnam, the nonprofit corporation behind the project, told me, “The university will be a major advance for organized civil society.”

Kerrey should resist calls to quit. As no other, he embodies the agony of overcoming war’s legacy. But he should send back that medal. He should push for the establishment of a Bui Van Vat fellowship in international humanitarian law.

And he should ensure that somewhere on campus the words with which Muhammad Ali explained his conscience-driven refusal of the draft are engraved: “I ain’t got nothing against them Vietcong.”

You can follow me on Twitter or join me on Facebook.

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook and Twitter, and sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter.

A version of this op-ed appears in print on June 8, 2016, on page A21 of the New York edition with the headline: Kerrey's Vietnam Dilemma.

© 2016 The New York Times Company