

ON DISCUSSING THE VIETNAM WAR WITH GOVERNOR KERREY

This is an outline of portions of a conversation I had with Governor Bob Kerrey of Nebraska on Friday, September 14, in the Governor's Office in the State Capitol in Lincoln. I had requested the conversation because I have been interested in the dynamics of the nation's recovery from the trauma of the war. Two years ago I published a book, The Unfinished War: Vietnam and the American Conscience, on this subject. Since 1979 I have been teaching a class in the University of California, Santa Barbara, on "The Impact of the Vietnam War on American Values." For several years I directed a study project on this theme for the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions. During the past several years I have visited a number of Vet Centers, established by the Vietnam Veterans Outreach Program, around the country. I have also been close to many of the persons who are exercising leadership in the Vietnam Veterans movements. Consequently I had been reading about Governor Kerrey, and had become acquainted with isolated references to his experience in Vietnam in statements he has made. I wanted to learn more, however, and the invitation to come to Lincoln for the ten-year anniversary celebration of the Nebraska Committee for the Humanities provided this opportunity.

Phyllis Narveson, my wife's cousin, introduced me to Governor Kerrey once we were inside his office. The Narvesons had been near neighbors of the Governor before he was elected. A few years ago they had swapped information about cedar shakes when Mr. Kerrey was remodeling his house. Ms.

Narveson, making a smooth transition, explained to the Governor that I too was a marathon runner. (Actually, I have run half-marathons on occasion, and have ballyhooed these in Christmas greetings we have sent to members of the family.) I said, weakly, that I haven't run a marathon for awhile. The Governor responded that he hadn't either. We talked next about Benson High in Omaha, and my days as a basketball player. But here, too, I didn't want to provide too much detail, fearing that I would be forced to disclose that the basketball story, like the marathon story, is a bit disappointing. But the initial repartee on this and other subjects assured me that I would like this man and enjoy talking with him.

I told him about the undergraduate class I teach, and where its collective discussion ended last June at the end of the 1983-84 academic year. I sketched a chronicle of the nation's response to the war beginning with the period of silence (following the war's end in 1975), continuing into the period in which interpretation of the war was being offered almost exclusively by returning combatants who were trying their hands writing their own journal-entry first-person narrative accounts, culminating in the years of growing national consciousness marked by a homecoming parade in Washington in November 1982, the dedication of the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington with its 58,012 names inscribed, and, on May 29, 1984, the funeral at Arlington Cemetery for the Unknown Soldier from the Vietnam War. I explained that we were trying to proceed from there. It seemed that with such increasing recognition, the veterans of the war were being depicted in more favorable light. Nowadays, it appears, instead of drawing attention to the intense and

and extensive trauma they are undergoing, the focus is on recovery and healing. And they in turn -- or, perhaps, in response -- are contributing positively, constructively and significantly to the collective pursuit of the common good. Furthermore, they are perceived in this light by growing numbers of the citizenry. I offered that Bob Kerrey's election as Governor of Nebraska can be taken as being symbolic of this recovery. Other Vietnam veterans have also been elected to positions of state and national leadership. In such places they are being looked to to utilize their Vietnam experience in formative ways.

Governor Kerrey smiled at all of this, told me he was amused because he hadn't seen himself in this light. He said that he didn't know that he had this reputation elsewhere in the country. And he offered me a soft drink.

I pushed the question a little harder. "But isn't it true," I asked, "that your experience with the Vietnam War influenced your decision to run for governor?" After a significant pause, Governor Kerrey said that "the answer to the question must be yes, but there wasn't a direct causal connection." He explained that there were other significant background factors involved. Then he gave me a brief description of the efforts to which he had devoted attention before seeking the governorship. He talked of being involved in the anti-war protest movement when he returned from Vietnam. He spoke of the effort he made, in league with Allard Loewenstein, to have Richard Nixon removed from office. He gave some hints about how he feels about both of those efforts today. But he dwelt longest on his stay in the hospital, attesting that this forced him to think about persons (and

their situations) he might not have thought about otherwise. The awareness of who people and what they have to go through had as much to do with his wanting to be governor as anything, he said.

I returned to the sequence of events that seems to mark the recovery period. I mentioned that it has taken many veterans nearly a decade or more to find ways to express themselves on the subject of the war. I made brief reference to some of the conclusions of recent analyses of post-traumatic stress disorders. I listed the fact that an estimated 500,000 veterans of the war are known or believed to be suffering severe emotional and psychological distress. I spoke of the high suicide rate among combat returnees. Governor Kerrey cited Elie Wiesel's interpretation of the holocaust, suggesting that the two events should be seen together. With an emotional impact of such proportions, it takes some time, he suggested, before the participants know how to speak, what words to use, what sense to make or venture.

He explained that the war was fought by young persons, many of them only eighteen or nineteen years of age. He asked me to reflect on what human beings are like in those years. The typical American combatant in Vietnam was the same age as the typical undergraduate students enrolled in a college or university class. He noted that this is the time when considerable experimentation is occurring because moral, ethical and religious values are not very firmly set. He said that persons of this age are learning what it is to be moral, that is, they are learning how to make moral decisions and to live accordingly. He suggested that interpreters of what transpired among Americans in Vietnam should pay close attention to this

time frame. The Vietnam War proved to be an exceedingly difficult environment for moral decision because those same eighteen and nineteen year olds spent most of their time responding to directives and orders from established authorities. Thus, it was during times of intense fighting that, to greater and lesser extents, they were out there on their own, not being told in each minute precisely what to do. When they got out in the field, under enemy fire, armed with their own weapons, it was like game time at last. Finally, they could do something for which they themselves would take responsibility instead of simply marching or responding to orders from some other source of moral authority. As a consequence, many got caught up in the thrills and excitement of battle.

Then he shifted quickly to his own moral development. What the experience in Vietnam did for him, in this respect, he said, is that it helped him discover an alternative to being morally tentative and relativist. He explained that it is fashionable to not wish to threaten anyone else's moral or ethical standards, and to hesitate to call something right and something else wrong. As a result, many people go about not having made up their minds about important, even crucial matters. The Vietnam experience forced Bob Kerrey to become more definite about such issues.

I asked for examples.

He began by saying that the question he gets asked most often about being in Vietnam is about how he could actually kill people, that is, take someone else's life. He confessed that he has thought about this a great deal; indeed, he has been forced to. And now he believes that there are

character. In this regard, I find it significant that portions of the situations that may justify taking someone else's life, the first of these being when one's own life is being seriously threatened, and the second being when one's loved ones' lives are being seriously threatened. The killing in Vietnam, he explained, was justified by the nation's leadership by an invocation of this second criterion: the social and political uprising there was regarded as posing a decisive threat to ourselves and to those whom we love. Without commenting on the soundness of this judgment, the Governor cautioned that we must be exceedingly careful. "Before long," he suggested, "we are also killing for ideology or race or religion." I stopped him when he mentioned religion, for I wanted to be sure that I understood what he was proposing. "Was there killing in Vietnam for reasons of religion?" I asked. "Certainly," he responded, and gave a number of examples of American troops being motivated by reports of how the Viet Cong had brutalized Christians living in some region. He added that the same incentives were utilized by leaders of the troops on the other side, as well. But the point of these citations was to reinforce the governor's contention that it is absolutely vital that we know what we are doing. For it is through the extension of moral imperatives loosely held and only weakly conceived that the human race has been diminished. This, clearly, is one of the primary lessons of the American involvement in Vietnam.

We spent the next few minutes talking about Jerry Falwell and the New Religious Right. I have been studying that movement in preparation for a book I am writing on the subject. I mentioned to the Governor that one of the concluding chapters of my book on the Vietnam War analyzes Falwell's interpretation of the war and its impact upon the national

character. In this regard, I find it significant that portions of the American religious community are feeling more comfortable about a revived militancy in this post-Vietnam War period.

But I wanted to talk about the students I know, many of whom were in the fourth and fifth grades, in 1975, when the war ended, and how they seem to be assimilating information about the catastrophic event. I cited the example of John Murphy, a University of California student who is also a veteran of the war, who asked for time in the class I teach so that he could tell the students about his experience in Vietnam. Not until he finished did we realize that this was the first time he had told the entire story -- or, at least, its sequence -- in spite of the fact that he had been home from the war for nearly fourteen years. When Mr. Murphy finished telling the class about some of the battles, and, most especially, about the welcome he didn't receive when he stepped off the plane on U.S. soil, in the State of Washington, being less than seventy two hours away from the battle fields of Vietnam, one of the students in the class stood spontaneously to say, "On behalf of this class, I'd like to welcome John Murphy home." As one would imagine, it was a moving experience, watching a new generation of young Americans providing a belated welcome home to a generation of conflicted warriors.

The Governor knew exactly what I was talking about, so much so that I didn't want him to say very much. I am certain that he could have provided numerous similar stories of his own. But when he spoke, he offered references and analogies that I couldn't place. He talked about flowers that get plucked from their nurturing environments; they wither and die,

he said, because they no longer have the necessary nutriments. He spoke too about looking at some pictures of his father, his grandfather, and his grandfather's father. Someday, he said, and not very many years from now, perhaps, Bob Kerrey's picture will be placed in sequence with the others, and persons of subsequent generations may be asking questions about him. He said that it is important that "we not destroy the magic" in this. I understood generally, but not specifically. I thought of Erik Erikson's work on the human life cycle and on generational change. But as I did so, I became acutely aware of the fact that we were engaged in a philosophical discussion right here in the Governor's office in the State Capitol a few minutes before 5 o'clock.

But what did he mean about not plucking flowers prematurely and refraining from destroying the magic? I'm not sure I know. I'm not sure I wish to know until I've had more time to look at the phrases from several sides. He began talking this way in the midst of a conversation about how, as Isaac Bashevis Singer puts it, "we become victims of our own passions." Clearly it is important in this regard that we not confuse regard for one's loved ones with all of its potential ideological and symbolic extensions and sanctions. But it was when we touched upon discovering ways by which the present generation of young Americans might avoid such traps that he mentioned the set of family photographs that had been placed side by side. Did it mean that each generation has some assigned place, as it were, within an ongoing continuum of experience and response? Could he have meant that each generation will do what it perceives needs to be done, which no one can outline for it in advance? Was he suggesting that because his

generation did what it did, the next one, too, will have specific responsibilities? Was all of this, as Elie Wiesel described the continuing response to the holocaust, the collective sequential way human beings work to accommodate the meaning of events that are fundamentally inexplicable and overwhelming?

I'm not sure I know what Governor Kerrey meant. I'm not sure he knows all of it either. But I am convinced that he would be unwilling to make meaning mechanical and interpretation strictly straight-line ordered. When, for example, I asked him about his ambition for the governorship, he was unwilling to attribute it to a single cause or catalyst. When it would have been appropriate for him to speak about the ravages of post-traumatic stress disorders, he invoked the name of Elie Wiesel, making his point by means of an allegory. And when I probed for leads as to what the present generation of witnesses might contribute to the positive resolution of the still-unfinished war's complicated plot, he immediately began talking about the need to keep flowers in their natural and nurturing conditions and about sustaining the magic. I would be claiming an understanding that is too specific were I to suggest that whenever he had the opportunity, the Governor selected the interpretive pathway of mystery. But I will acknowledge, without hesitation, that he gave me a promising array of symbols and images to contemplate.

Knowing that I would do some additional homework on the topic, I asked Governor Kerrey if he had any essays on the subject that I might

read. I mentioned that I had heard that he makes references to the Vietnam War, on occasion, in his public addresses. He seemed surprised at this report, affirming that the few times he has talked about the war have been in connection with the legislative process, and sometimes almost in jest. He cited a time, recently, when he spoke about being in Vietnam on a day when the troops he was leading nearly took out against their own people, who had circled back, because they weren't sure in dim light who they were or where they were to be. He said he used this illustration to encourage some legislators to be certain of their fundamental intentions so they wouldn't be lending support to a venture that would turn out to be counterproductive.

My impressions of the Governor?

He is quick, alert, intelligent, well-read, charming, engaging and disarming at the same time, a man with exceptional leadership talents around whom -- as far as I could tell -- there is a sense of calm, quiet and orderliness. I was aware at all times

that I was talking with a governor, and yet he made me feel completely at ease about it. I would expect that Bob Kerrey can be exceedingly tough, both on issues about which he has firm conviction and while negotiating with other individuals and parties. I came away from the meeting realizing that I had just had the privilege of meeting and talking with an enormously gifted and distinctive individual, a man who possesses uncommon political abilities as well as a promising political future, and one with whom one can easily talk of the humanities.

And, as I have been reflecting on it, I think my hunch about the Vietnam War is correct. I believe it is Bob Kerrey, as well as veterans who identify with his aspirations, who will discover the longer-range constructive meaning of the nation's prolonged "dark night of the soul." For me that story is filled with death and resurrection motifs, on deeply human individual and collective levels. That is, it is still possible -- as it continues to happen following the nation's complicated involvement in the Civil War -- that the ongoing pursuit of the common good can proceed with a chastened, more sober and richer moral resolve because, as Michael Herr has written in his book DISPATCHES -- "Vietnam, Vietnam, Vietnam, we've all been there." Governor Kerrey has been there and has returned. In my judgment, it is in the manner that he has chosen to give expression to his return that he has become -- whether admitting the same or not -- one of the true constructive leaders within the post-Vietnam recovery process. And I would expect such constructive work to be directed toward additional cultural tasks.

I am delighted that I had the opportunity to talk with him. It makes me feel even prouder of my cherished Nebraska roots, despite the

fact that the Benson Bunnies did lose to Fremont in the high school championships in 1951, one of the last times I visited the city of Lincoln. And while I'm at it, I should also confess that I may have led Phyllis and Bud Narveson on a bit about my marathon-running abilities.

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This essay is a description of a conversation the author had with Governor Bob Kerrey of Nebraska about the latter's involvement in the Vietnam War and its aftermath. The conversation occurred on Friday, September 14, in the Governor's office in the State Capitol in Lincoln.