



HUMANITIES

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On Discussing the Vietnam War with Governor Kerrey

Walter H. Capps, President of the National Federation of State Humanities Councils, talked with Governor Bob Kerrey about the Vietnam War and its aftermath when he was in Lincoln for the ten-year anniversary celebration of the NCH. This essay, describing that conversation, is particularly timely as national attention centers on Vietnam a decade after the war's end.

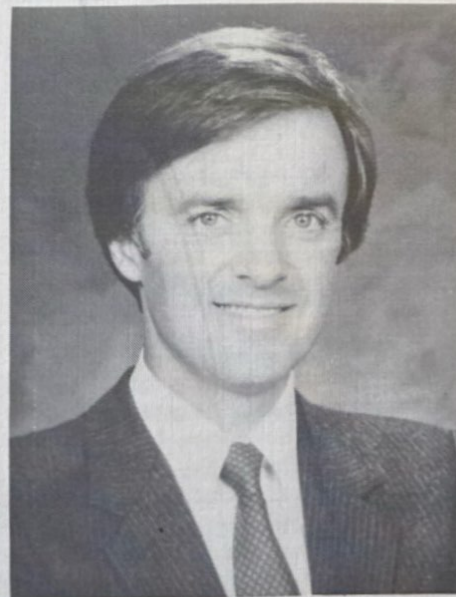
The following outlines portions of a conversation I had with Governor Bob Kerrey of Nebraska on Friday, September 14, 1985 in his office in the State Capitol in Lincoln. I requested the conversation because I have been interested in the dynamics of the nation's recovery from the trauma of the Vietnam 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." I told the governor about this undergraduate class, and where its collective discussion was 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 writing 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. Instead of drawing attention to the intense and extensive trauma they are undergoing, veterans now focus on recovery and healing. They are contributing positively, constructively, and significantly to the collective pursuit of the common good. I offered that Bob Kerrey's election as governor of Nebraska might be taken as symbolic of this recovery. He smiled and said he was amused because he hadn't seen himself in this light; he didn't know that he had this reputation elsewhere in the country.

"But isn't it true," I asked, "that your experience with the Vietnam War influenced your decision to run for governor?"

Governor Kerrey paused and said, "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 briefly described his efforts before seeking the governorship. He talked of being involved in the anti-war protest movement when he returned from Vietnam and his effort, in league with Allard Loewenstein, to have



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Richard Nixon removed from office. He hinted about his feelings regarding both of those efforts today. But he dwelt longest on his hospital stay, attesting that this forced him to think about persons (and their situations) that he might not have thought about otherwise. This had as much to do with his wanting to be governor as anything, he said.

Returning 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. An estimated 500,000 veterans of the war are known or believed to be suffering severe emotional and psychological distress. 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, he said, it takes some time 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 student 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. 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. The Vietnam War proved to be an exceedingly difficult environment for moral decisions because those same young people usually responded to directives and orders from established authorities. Thus it was during times of intense

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fighting that 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 would take responsibility themselves instead of simply marching or responding to orders from some other source of moral authority. As a consequence, many got caught up in the thrill and excitement of battle.

Then he shifted quickly to his own moral development. What the experience in Vietnam did for him, he said, was to help him discover an alternative to being morally tentative and relativist. He explained that it is fashionable to not question anyone else's moral or ethical standards, and to hesitate to call something right and something else wrong. As a result, many people have not 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 how he could actually kill people, that is, take someone's life. He said that he has thought about this a great deal and now believes there are 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. 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, wanting to understand his statement. "Was there killing in Vietnam for reasons of religion?" I asked.

"Certainly," he responded, and gave examples of American troops being motivated by reports of Viet Cong brutalizing Christians living in some region. He added that leaders of enemy troops used similar incentives. 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 moved on to discuss Jerry Falwell and the New Religious Right. I mentioned to the governor that a chapter of my book on the Vietnam War analyzes Falwell's interpretation of the war and its impact upon the national character. It seems 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 student who is also a veteran, who asked for time in class to talk about his experience in Vietnam. Not until he finished did we realize that this was the first time he had told the entire story, despite the fact that he had been home from the war for nearly fourteen years. Mr. Murphy told the class about some of the battles, and most especially, about the welcome he didn't receive when he stepped off the plane onto U.S. soil, less than seventy-two hours away from the battlefields of Vietnam. One of the students stood and spontaneously said, "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. He probably could have told similar stories, but 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 nutrients. He spoke too about looking at some pictures of his

father, his grandfather, and his grandfather's father. Someday, he said, perhaps his own picture will be placed in sequence with the others, and persons of subsequent generations might ask about him. He said that it is important that "we not destroy the magic" in this. I understood generally, but not specifically.

But what did he mean about not plucking flowers prematurely and refraining from destroying the magic? I'm not sure I know or wish to know until I've had more time to examine the phrases from several sides. He began talking this way in the midst of a conversation about how, as Isaac Bashevis Singer put it, "we become victims of our own passions." Clearly it is important not to confuse regard for one's loved ones with all of its potential ideological and symbolic extensions and sanctions. When we touched upon discovering ways by which the present generation of young Americans might avoid such traps, he mentioned the set of family photographs that had been placed side by side. Did he mean that each generation has some assigned place within an ongoing continuum of experience and response? Or that each generation will do what it perceives needs to be done, which no one can predict 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, or that he knows all of it either. He was unwilling to attribute his ambition for governorship 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 talked about the need to keep flowers in their natural and nurturing conditions and about sustaining the magic. Whenever he had the opportunity, the governor seemed to select the interpretive pathway of mystery. But he gave me a promising array of symbols and images to contemplate.

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I mentioned to Governor Kerrey that I had heard that he makes references to the Vietnam War, on occasion, in his public addresses. He seemed surprised and affirmed 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 to avoid lending support to a venture that would turn out to be counterproductive.

My impressions of Governor Kerrey? 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 feeling privileged to have met and talked with an enormously gifted and distinctive individual, a man who possesses uncommon political abilities as well as a promising political future.

I believe it is Bob Kerrey, and other veterans who identify with his aspirations, who will discover the longer-range constructive meaning of the nation's "dark night of the soul." The story of that process is filled with death and resurrection motifs on deeply human individual and collective levels. That is, the ongoing pursuit of the common good can proceed with a chastened, more sober, and richer moral resolve because, as Michael Herr wrote in *Dispatches*, "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.

HRC Purchases New Films as a Result of Preview Conferences

Who should make decisions about questions of public policy involving science and technology? What was the women's experience in settling the plains? How can the aged transcend the multiplicity of problems they face in contemporary society? These and many other questions are raised and related issues explored in the new films purchased for the HRC as a result of evaluations from recent preview conferences.

Funded by a Kiewit grant, HRC preview conferences were held in three sites—Scottsbluff, Kearney and Norfolk—the week of April 29. Forty-two representatives of public libraries, historical associations, educational institutions, and senior citizen centers spent a day viewing films and videotapes featuring a variety of humanities topics and public issues. Evaluations from these conferences guided HRC staff in selecting for purchase those media programs which best illuminate issues or themes from a humanities perspective, are suitable for out-of-school adult audiences, and promote discussion.

Among the films chosen for purchase are "Great Grandmother," a half-hour film exploring women's frontier experience; "The Day After Trinity," an absorbing documentary on the life of J. Robert Oppenheimer, which raises a number of difficult questions about decision making in the fields of science and technology; "Nobody Ever Died of Old Age," a powerful exploration of the practical and ethical issues involved in society's treatment of the aged and the elderly's perception of themselves; and "Shock of the New," an eight-part series exploring the growth of modern art and its impact on society.

New NCH Address

The NCH will move to the Lincoln Center Building on 15th & "N" Streets on July 1, 1985. The new mailing address will be:

Nebraska Committee for the Humanities
Suite 422 Lincoln Center Building
215 Centennial Mall South
Lincoln, NE 68508
The telephone number will remain unchanged.

Recent Grants Awarded

MAJOR GRANTS

Nebraska Commission on the Status of Women (\$3,323) for "Samantha Comes to Town: An Evening With Jane Curry," a Chautauqua-like performance to be held in five Nebraska communities. In these programs Dr. Jane Curry will portray Samantha Allen, a popular 19th- and early 20th-century literary character from the works of Marietta Holley. Project Director is Jean O'Hara.

Omaha Children's Museum (\$15,694 in gifts and matching funds) for "Work and Play: Growing Up in Frontier Nebraska," a hands-on exhibit on the everyday lives of children in a Plains Indian village and on the homestead. A series of workshops will provide further insight into the lives of children in frontier Nebraska. Project Director is Robert L. Russell.

Nebraska Task Force on Foreign Language Education (\$4,770) for conferences for foreign language teachers in three Nebraska communities. The conferences will provide training in innovative teaching approaches and emphasize the importance of learning a second language. Project Director is Norman Zinn.

Native American Public Broadcasting Consortium (\$5,087) for "Catlin/Pawnee Indians," a 15-minute dramatic videotape documentary to be used as part of a 60-minute documentary on George Catlin's life and work. This segment will focus on the conflict between Indian and non-Indian concepts of art as seen through the eyes of a contemporary father and son visiting a gallery. Project Director is Frank Blythe.

SECONDARY EDUCATION GRANTS

"The Prairie Humanist"
Hastings Senior High School
\$2,000
Project Director: Wendell McConaha

Recent Grants

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"American Historical Eras Revealed Through the Lives of Representative Men and Women"

Roncalli High School, Omaha

\$2,000

Project Director: Susan O'Brien

"Seventh and Eighth Grade Humanities Course Guide for the Omaha Public Schools"

Department of Instructional Services, Omaha Public Schools

\$2,000

Project Director: Louise Hairston

"Journey to the Source of the Platte"

Hastings Public Schools, District #18

\$1,990

Project Director: William Locke

"Integrating International Relations and Advanced Composition"

Scottsbluff Public Schools

\$1,999

Project Director: Roger Dawdy

"Dance: A Socio-Historical Art Medium"

North High School, Omaha

\$2,000

Project Director: Jim Shepard

"Discovery of the Arts Through Time"

Alliance City Schools

\$2,000

Project Director: Richard Stephens

"Changes Are Coming: Literature and Art Will Help"

Lincoln Public Schools

\$2,000

Project Director: Geraldine Cox

MINI GRANTS

"The War & the Soviet Citizen: Hardship, Religion & Cult"

UNL Department of History

\$2,000

Project Director: James McClelland

"Project Renew-Phase I: Nebraska Assembly on Teaching"

Doane College, UNL Teachers College, Chadron State College

\$4,000 gifts and matching

Project Director: JoAnn Kimball

"Phi Alpha Theta Centennial Series" Chadron State College, Division of Social Sciences

\$1,280

Project Director: Rolland Dewing

"The Magnificent Loser, William Jennings Bryan"

Nebraskans for Public Television

\$2,000

Project Director: Gene Bunge

"The Death of the Small Town"

Nebraskans for Public Television

\$2,000

Project Director: Gene Bunge

"Gothenburg History Exhibit"

Dawson County Historical Society

\$1,668

Project Director: Steve Holen

"Women Writers of the Great Plains"

Educational Service Unit #9, Hastings

\$1,789

Project Director: Tom Barlow

"Lessons From Total War"

Nebraska Wesleyan University

\$2,000

Project Director: Anthony R. Epp

"American Indian Contributions to the United States Revolutionary Tradition"

UNO Department of Communication

\$630

Project Director: Bruce E. Johansen

"Yevtushenko in America: Spokesman for Russian Culture"

UNL Department of English

\$2,000

Project Director: Charles Mignon

Governor Appoints New NCH Member



Jan Murphy

Janet I. Murphy of Crawford was named to the NCH this spring by Governor Robert Kerrey. Ms. Murphy is a Reading Specialist at the Student Development Center at Chadron State College and former Director of the Teaching-Learning Center at Chadron State, where she was joint founder of a faculty writing group. She holds a Master of Science from Kearney State College and has taught speech and English to high school and college students in several Nebraska communities. Ms. Murphy was named to replace Ruth Morton, who resigned recently to accept a position at Marylhurst College in Portland, Oregon.

New Deadlines for Major and Mass Media Grants

Beginning in 1986, NCH major grant deadlines will be February 1 and August 1. Major grant requests are those for more than \$2,000. **The two upcoming major grant deadlines for 1985, August 1 and December 1, remain unchanged.**

Beginning in 1987, the mass media grant deadline will be January 1. This applies to grant requests for film, television, videotape, radio, and publication

projects of more than \$10,000. **The next mass media grant deadline will be November 1, 1985, with subsequent deadlines on January 1, 1987 and each January thereafter.**

Project ideas for major and mass media grant applications should be discussed with NCH staff before submission.

There is no change in deadlines for mini grants (January 1, March 1, May 1, July 1, September 1, November 1). Call or write the NCH office for revised information and guidelines and grant application forms.