

THE LIFE

The Education of Robert Kerrey

by Dean Stewart

Robert Kerrey walks with a limp. It's slight, not very noticeable at first. But if asked, he'll explain how he lost the lower part of his right leg in Vietnam.

Kerrey left office as the Democratic governor of Nebraska at the end of last year. To the dismay of his allies and the electorate, Kerrey decided in late 1985 not to seek a second term, though reelection was a probability. Cryptic, almost metaphysical about his reasons, Kerrey couched his explanation with "in my heart" locations. He added vaguely that he had other plans: teaching perhaps.

As it happens, Robert Kerrey is in Santa Barbara. Without ballyhoo, indeed with little publicity of any sort, Kerrey came to UCSB in early January to assist in teaching Professor Walter Capps' very popular class on the history of, and the American experience in, the Vietnam war.

Kerrey is a man of fine features and delicate gestures. His relatively small frame (about 5 feet 10 inches, 145 pounds) belies a willfulness of enormous proportion. Sympathetic and friendly, his ingenuous manner and self-deprecating humor make him naturally likable. Just as naturally, because

he's a politician, it's easy to find his personality suspect.

For one who has been called a rising star among Democrats, Kerrey's attitude is casual and indefinite. Still unable to explain clearly why he decided not to seek a second term as governor of Nebraska, he says now that he has no special plans outside of teaching and getting his business affairs in order. Running for the Senate from Nebraska seems his most likely option. Kerrey is willing to consent, only in the most tentative way, that that may be a possibility.

Over the past several years, amid discussion of the New Federalism or farm-state politics, Kerrey's name always comes up. At 43, he has established himself in the national media as a mainstream Democrat with a youthful liberal flair. His romance with actress Debra Winger didn't hurt his image at all. But there are those who suggest that in its aftermath, Kerrey is forlornly drifting away from public life and politics. Following him about the UCSB campus last week, however, it was hard to imagine Kerrey being too unhappy. Young women were anxious to say hello, introduce themselves, even invite him out for a beer.

"This is something of a vacation for me," Kerrey said with a smile. "It's an important time, too, though. A lot of what I'm trying to do is develop a sounder understanding of the United States as a whole, of state government, and of Vietnam in particular."

Besides giving some of his time to political science classes, Kerrey has been speaking in the community, as he did recently at Santa Barbara High School. But his real motivation for coming here has been to teach and continue to learn about Vietnam.

Walter Capps' class, begun in 1979, is formally named "Religion and the Impact of the War in Vietnam." The class has little to do with religion; it is merely taught through the Religious Studies department. On campus it is commonly called the "Vietnam class," and has had for the past several years, Capps believes, the largest enrollment of any course offered in the University of California system. It easily fills Campbell hall to capacity.

Considerable national attention has been given the class; most recently, the CBS news program *60 Minutes* has been working on a segment for future broadcast. And consistently the class attracts Santa Barbarans who want to hear one or another of the frequent guest speakers, many of whom are Vietnam veterans. It was as a guest speaker that Robert Kerrey first came to UCSB.

"Walter Capps is originally from Nebraska," Kerrey explained, "and happened to be there a few years ago. We met through a mutual friend. He told me about the class and invited me to speak, which I did a couple of times. I was invited back again this year and I offered then to spend more time and take a larger role in the teaching."

Teaching is a great way of learning, Kerrey has discovered, and went on to cite the reading and rereading he has done while at UCSB. In casual conversation he is perhaps more anxious to ask opinions, even of an interviewer, than to express his own. If one falls relatively within the age of service in Vietnam, Kerrey wants to hear the story.

"One of the things I like about the class," said Kerrey, "is that it has given veterans the chance to speak. Too little attention has been paid to the participants' perspective, especially from an emotional point of view. The trouble is, you can't put that any place. You can't neatly do anything with it. But it isn't all useless stuff."

Interest in Vietnam and Vietnam veterans runs in cycles. Anniversaries of significant

events, TV specials, newspaper coverage are all likely to spark conversation, reopen old wounds, often provoke veterans to seek counseling. But movies are the significant stimulus. They can even give the veteran a sort of chic appeal.

"Vietnam veterans," said Kerrey, nearly laughing, "everyone should own one."

"The movie *Platoon* is good, but there is a lot of self-pity in it. Emotion that is remorseful but takes responsibility can lead to new possibilities. Self-pity is a dead end. The other thing about a movie like *Platoon* is that it can only show so much. It's just one story. It's Oliver Stone's story. It isn't my story."

Growing up in Lincoln, Nebraska, Kerrey came from a large, Protestant church-going family. After graduating from college with a degree in pharmacy, he was just beginning to get his first work experience when the selective service began to inquire as to his whereabouts and express an interest in his physical fitness. This was in 1966 and the war in Vietnam was already a rising crescendo of national debate. But for Robert Kerrey, duty and obligation were never questioned. He can speak of the shortcomings of this sort of thinking, still he remains proud of it.

Exploring officer training programs in anticipation of being drafted, Kerrey eventually joined the Navy. At that point, his ocean experience consisted largely of having read Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny*, which made life on a ship seem exciting. After his first experience on an ocean-going vessel, Kerrey discovered he was inclined toward seasickness. Looking around for something else, he discovered underwater demolitions training, and was selected for the Navy SEALs. Perhaps the most highly trained of American combat troops, the SEAL teams are specialized commando units. Kerrey contrasts the cohesiveness and motivation that exists within such a group with the infighting and ineffectiveness Oliver Stone portrays in *Platoon*.

Sent to Southeast Asia in January 1969, Kerrey was involved in operations off the coast of central South Vietnam. In March of that year he participated in the last of the few brief battles he was in.

"Our intelligence had found out about an island," Kerrey said, "that the North Vietnamese were using for training. There was a guy there who was especially wanted, too. So we went in about three in the morning. In what followed, a grenade or some kind of explosive device went off near my leg, but I was able to remain conscious and direct fire."

Kerrey muses that if a movie were to be made about his wartime experiences, most of it would take place in the hospital. He lost the lower part of his right leg. For his conspicuous participation, he received the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Kerrey sighs: "Medals only help to disguise the fact that war is awful. First you have to have an action that is heroic. I have trouble with that already, the idea of heroism being equated with killing people. Then it has to be witnessed. And it has to be witnessed by someone who can write. And it has to be witnessed by someone who can write and who likes you. And then it has to be pushed through the system by someone who knows how to do it. I wasn't going to take the thing at first. I was persuaded later. If it were up to me I wouldn't give medals."

If Kerrey's Medal of Honor did anything, it edged him closer to politics. Invited to speak at clubs and service groups when he

Next ▶



"Medals only disguise the fact that war is awful." Nebraska governor/Vietnam vet, Robert Kerrey.

◀ Preceding

returned home, Kerrey, with increasing misgivings about the war, spoke not against it in general but against Richard Nixon's handling of it. Although a Republican at the time, Kerrey fell under the influence of liberal Democrat Allard Lowenstein. They met when Lowenstein was speaking at the University of Nebraska. A former New York congressman, a leader in the "dump Johnson movement," and high on Nixon's "enemies list," Lowenstein exerted a powerful influence on Kerrey. He still refers to Lowenstein as the finest patriot he has ever met.

In the 1970s Kerrey married and had children. He worked as a pharmacist and a bartender, and with his brother-in-law opened a chain of family restaurants called Grandmother's, which they still own. Kerrey discovered the work of Albert Camus. Kerrey points to the French writer's short fable-like novel, *The Fall*, as a particular favorite, with its insistence on not judging others from what one presumes is a morally superior position.

By the early 1980s, with a strong background in business and the idiosyncratic

inspiration of Allard Lowenstein and Albert Camus, Kerrey was ready to seek public office. It is one of the anomalies of contemporary politics that the people of Nebraska were ready for him.

Kerrey often comes back to the subject of Vietnam. It is, for him, the ghost of contemporary politics.

"I object to those who say that our foreign policy is suffering from a post-Vietnam mentality," Kerrey commented. "We should have a post-Vietnam mentality. The real problem is that we still have a post-World War II mentality. Reagan hasn't developed any deterrent to communism, as some have said. And we're repeating some of the flaws of the so-called containment policy. In Nicaragua military intervention isn't called for. It would be counterproductive. Lately we've been doing more to establish relations with Iran than we have with Nicaragua, and they have a far less civilized government."

Happily, Kerrey says, he is not in charge of American foreign policy. And he feels no urgency to develop a foreign policy spiel for all occasions.

"For a quarter of a century or more," Kerrey said, "we decided that Vietnam was

so important to us we were going to pour billions of dollars into that country. That we had friends there. And now it's all nothing to us. It didn't happen. They don't exist. We don't even recognize or have diplomatic relations with Vietnam. That's nonsense. We defoliated the country, disrupted the culture; we did things that were good and generous and all kinds of things that had very bad consequences. And now we want to turn away from it.

"I don't know what kind of relations we should have with Vietnam. But some kind. We've got to take responsibility, recognize that it all happened. We ought not ignore what went on there."

Kerrey still insists that the war was noble in its intentions, even if the goals of democracy and independence of South Vietnam were impossibilities. Of the conduct of the war, the saturation bombing, and the destruction of the landscape and social fabric, he has nothing but criticism. Contradicting himself, or simply thinking out loud, Kerrey will speak of the Vietnamese communists' ruthlessness and suggest the United States was not ruthless enough in its war effort. Maybe Americans are not very good at warfare, he suggests. Specula-

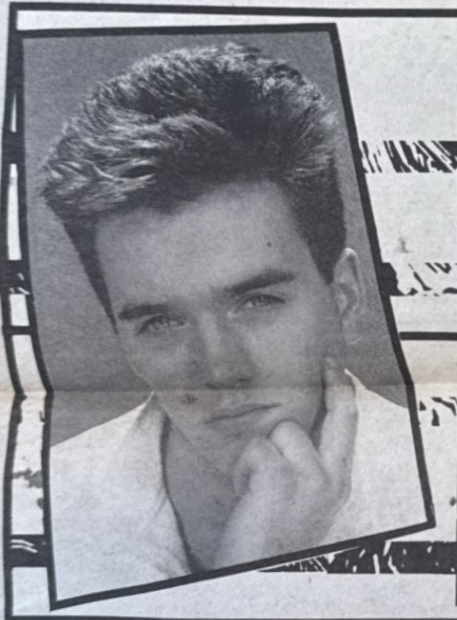
ting on a hypothetical visit from Ho Chi Minh to Capp's Vietnam class, Kerrey said the former North Vietnamese leader would laugh out loud at the sentimentality, the naivete, of such an exercise.

On a range of national issues, Kerrey points almost wearily to what he calls the "culprit of big business" and the negative influence of large corporations in helping to resolve problems that face the American people. He peeps up a little when discussing national health insurance, calling it a right Americans should enjoy. Then points to the Canadian system as a possible model.

Asked about the subject of the homeless, a national problem that has been especially acrimonious locally, Kerrey put on a mock-serious politician's face and says, "I think that is a very significant issue." Then shrugs and smiles.

"To tell you the truth, I don't know much about the whole subject."

As an ex-governor and non-candidate, Kerrey takes a particular pleasure in not having answers for everything. He genuinely gives the impression of someone asking himself the same questions about history and politics—and his place in it all—that are constantly asked him by others.



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Letters

Cryptic Scrawl

I feel a bit like John Lennon trying to explain his "Beatles are bigger than Jesus" comment, and a bit like Larry Speakes after a Reagan press conference explaining what the president *meant* to say. Nonetheless, in light of the feedback I've already received, I think I should explain the Reagan/666/Anti-Christ statement attributed to me in Nick Welsh's article in your March 11 issue.

In De La Guerra Plaza, near the entrance to the *News-Press* (remember them?) building, someone years ago scrawled into some wet cement the following: "Ronald Wilson Reagan=666." When your reporter asked for my views on the state of the world, the future of man and Reagan in particular, that scrawl popped into my head. "If one believes in that sort of thing," I said, "Reagan fits the criteria..." I then proceeded to "argue" the point academically, in the same way that I might "argue" that Paul McCartney is dead because a backward passage in some Beatle song says so.

As the article clearly states, I do not believe that Ronald Reagan is the devil just because his three names all have six letters. If my overall view of the world and man's future is less than optimistic, it is because of world overpopulation, our incredible technical achievements in the area of destruction, and the nature of man himself. I don't anticipate dying of old age...but not because Ronald Reagan is any kind of "Anti-Christ."

(P.S. My wife's name is Kathie, and my sister's name is Katie. In fact, they're both named Kathleen Ann(e) DeWitt! Aside from those minor words, the article I think I'll go re-read it now over an extraordinarily plain hamburger and a Coke.)

Gerry DeWitt

Cliff Dwellers

Even though council has taken the liberty to redesign the Cypress Point project in council chambers, it should still be denied.

The plan, as modified by council, results in an unacceptable level of traffic through the adjacent Mesa neighborhood. Even the reduced size project will generate 50 percent more traffic than now exists. Fifty percent!

Suggestions that the skilled care facility be increased to 59 beds are also unacceptable. This facility, which was never addressed in the EIR, will generate a disproportionate amount of commercial traffic.

Discussions at the last council meeting on Cypress Point were to the effect that the developers could come back at a later date for additional units should the traffic levels not be as high as estimated. Will council require the developers to remove units if the traffic is heavier than anticipated?

It was encouraging that council voted to protect the Live Oak grove. That decision is of major significance (please keep it in mind when debating the future of the riparian habitat at the base of Gibraltar

Dam). As important as the oak grove, however, is the *entire* ecosystem represented on the Wilcox Property. Please save the site and the neighborhood. Don't force the issue into court. Deny the project.

Robert Halton

Religious Experience

I appreciate Dean Stewart's unusually informative, sensitive and perceptive portrayal of former-Governor Bob Kerrey ("The Education of Robert Kerrey," March 11), who is in Santa Barbara on a teaching assignment at UCSB. But I must correct one misleading and erroneous statement.

Mr. Stewart observes that the class on the Vietnam War that Kerrey and I teach together "has little to do with religion; it is merely taught in the Religious Studies Department."

The truth is that the class has a great deal to do with religion, not in denominational or institutional senses, but in a national collective sense. Our intention is to explore the character, the religious or spiritual quality of the nation, both as defined by our founders and as assessed during and following the Vietnam War. In our reading assignments, and in a number of class lectures, we focus on the nature of function of civil religion in America, and we trace its influence on our decisions about when and under what circumstances we choose to go to war. In coming to terms with the experiences of the veterans of the war, as well as with those who stayed out of the conflict for reasons of conscience, we speak of the kind of self-knowledge or self-consciousness that also qualifies as being religious.

Rather than having "little to do with religion," the class is mostly about religion. In my judgment, this is what distinguishes the approach we are taking from other legitimate academic approaches that might be utilized were the course taught in history, political science, sociology, or military science departments. Much of the power of the class is that it helps make fundamentally religious subjects both personally and academically accessible.

Walter H. Capps

Taste of Honey

[In reference to the Angry Poodle's opinion of Campaign '87's criticism of City Council, March 4]: When we said that the children will not forget their parents' pain and will one day take their place in that room [council chambers], we

meant that literally; because by the time they're adults, we expect we will have the district elections we're struggling to acquire now, and some of those children will be elected to the council. If representatives of minorities, tenants, and poor, working people were on City Council now, I don't think they would have allowed landlords to walk over tenants with children the way the current council has the last two-and-a-half years.

It also seems true that if "honey catches more flies," as Trixie suggested, landlords would not have succeeded in getting the council to do an EIR examining whether not discriminating against children would harm the environment. Actually, landlords didn't use honey, unless it was in the disguise of threats or lawsuits. Likewise, last week when Jeanne [Grafy], Harriet [Miller] and Lyle [Reynolds] were wringing their hands over problems they saw, a child protection amendment was then voted unanimously by others to adopt it. I think the trial of a lawsuit coming from the side was infinitely more persuasive than a bus load of honey would have been.

"Honey catches more flies" is a misleading statement. It was so, then hard to improve working conditions, one's place up, fewer rent increases, know the only thing rents is rent control, from what we've all seen. Watsonville cannery workers not winning their strike was "honey." I think it's no news that "honey" is good for minor complaints, but the effects of child discrimination range from child abuse, to suicide, to giving your children away. So, it's fine to call harsh criticism of the council "strident," but I think it's good to also mention that reality is strident, too, because "strident" means "harsh."

Therese Norris

The Flow of History

In 1965 I sat in William Burroughs's apartment in downtown Manhattan, and in his dry, mid-western accent, a cross between W.C. Fields and a defrocked priest, he was saying: "The French pulled out because they got smart, then the dumb bastards went in, going to be the same over again. We're going to china. The jungle better, ranks, and nobles, ference, and then they just march our regiments off a cliff." And, of course, he was right.

Watching *Platoon*, in cushy Santa Barbara, in the beautiful

IMPRESSIONS

by Claire Rabe

No, she didn't want to do jury duty again! Tomorrow she would call her dentist, ask him to write an excuse. She needed a root canal anyway. Or she could show up at the courthouse hoping to be disqualified. Certainly her answers to the lawyers would be geared to lose.