

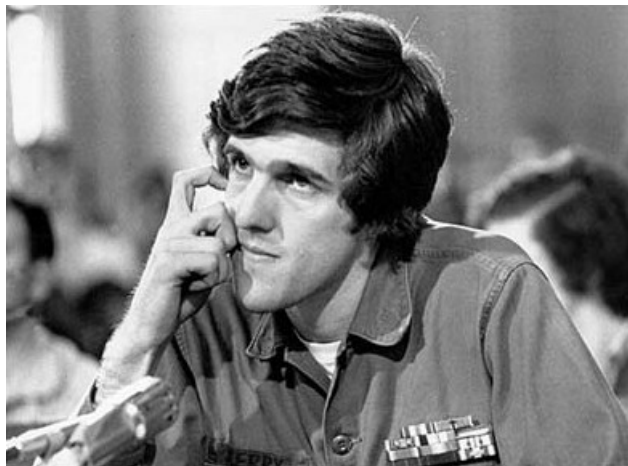


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John Kerry

Statement Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee

delivered 22 April 1971, Washington, D.C.



AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio

Thank you very much, Senator Fulbright, Senator Javits, Senator Symington, Senator Pell.

I would like to say for the record that -- and also for the men behind me who are also wearing the uniform and their medals -- that my sitting up here is really symbolic. I'm not here as John Kerry. I'm here as one member of a group of 1000, which is a small representation of a very much larger group of veterans in this country. And were it possible for all of them to sit at this table, they would be here and have the same kind of testimony.

I would simply like to speak in very general terms. I -- I apologize if my statement is general because I received notification yesterday you would hear me, and I'm afraid, because of the injunction, I was up most of the night and haven't had a great deal of chance to prepare.



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I would like to talk representing all those veterans and say that several months ago in Detroit we had an investigation at which over 150 honorably discharged, and many very highly decorated, veterans testified to war crimes committed in Southeast Asia.

These were not isolated incidents but crimes committed on a day-to-day basis with the full awareness of officers at all levels of command. It's impossible to describe to you exactly what did happen in Detroit -- the emotions in the room and the feelings of the men who were reliving their experiences in Vietnam. But they did. They relived the absolute horror of what this country, in a sense, made them do.

They told the stories of times that they had personally raped, cut off ears, cut off heads, taped wires from portable telephones to human genitals and turned up the power, cut off limbs, blown up bodies, randomly shot at civilians, razed villages in the fashion reminiscent of Genghis Khan, shot cattle and dogs for fun, poisoned food stocks, and generally ravaged the countryside of South Vietnam in addition to the normal ravage of war and the normal and very particular ravaging which is done by the applied bombing power of this country.

We call this investigation the "Winter Soldier Investigation." The term *Winter Soldier* is a play on words of Thomas Paine's in 1776 when he spoke of the Sunshine Patriot and summertime soldiers who deserted at Valley Forge because the going was rough.

And we who have come here to Washington have come here because we feel we have to be winter soldiers now. We could come back to this country; and we could be quiet; we could hold our silence; we could not tell what went on in Vietnam. But we feel because of what threatens this country, the fact that the crimes threaten it, not reds, not redcoats but the crimes which we're committing are what threaten it; and we have to speak out.

I would like to talk to you a little bit about what the result is of -- of the feelings these men carry with them after coming back from Vietnam. The country doesn't know it yet but it's created a monster, a monster in the form of millions of men who have been taught to deal and to trade in violence, and who are given the chance to die for the biggest nothing in



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history; men who have returned with a sense of anger and a sense of betrayal which no one has yet grasped.

As a veteran, and one who feels this anger, I'd like to talk about it. We're angry because we feel we have been used in the worst fashion by the Administration of this country. 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 freedoms which those misfits abuse.

And this was used as a rallying point for our effort in Vietnam.

But for us, his boys in Asia whom the country was 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's a distortion because we in no way considered 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 were ashamed of and hated what we were called to do in Southeast Asia. In our opinion, and from our experience, there is nothing in South Vietnam, nothing 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, and it's that kind of hypocrisy which we feel has torn this country apart.



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We are probably much more angry than that and I don't want to go into the foreign policy aspects because I'm outclassed here. I know that all of you have talked about every possible - every possible alternative to getting out of Vietnam. We understand that. We know that you've considered the seriousness of the aspects to the utmost level and I'm not going to try and deal on that. But I want to relate to you the feeling which many of the men who've returned to this country express because 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 that 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 wanted everything to do with the war, particularly with this foreign presence of the United States of America, to leave them alone in peace; and 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 found also that all too often American men were dying in those rice paddies for want of support from their allies. We saw first hand how monies from American taxes was used for a corrupt dictatorial regime. We saw that many people in this country had a one-sided idea of who was kept free by our flag, as blacks provided the highest percentage of casualties. 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.



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We rationalized destroying villages in order to save them. We saw America lose her sense of morality as she accepted very coolly a My Lai and refused to give up the image of American soldiers that hand out chocolate bars and chewing gum. We learned the meaning of "free-fire zones," "shoot 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 using weapons against "oriental human beings," with quotation marks around that. We fought using weapons against those people which I do not believe this country would dream of using were we fighting in a European theater -- or let us say a non-third-world people theater. And so 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 the reoccupation of the North Vietnamese; because -- because we watched pride allow the most unimportant of 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 Sahns and Hill 881's and Fire Base 6's and so many others.

And now we're 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 -- Each --

Committee Chair (Sen. Fulbright): I hope you won't interrupt. He's making a very significant statement. And let him proceed.

Mr. Kerry: 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 United States doesn't have to admit something that the entire world already knows, so that we cannot say that we've made a



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mistake. Someone has to die so that President Nixon won't be, and these are his words, "the first President to lose a war."¹

And 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? But we're trying to do that, and we're doing it with thousands of rationalizations, and if you read carefully the President's last speech to the people of this country, you can see that he says, and says clearly:

*But the issue, gentlemen, the issue is communism, and the question is whether or not we will leave that country to the Communists or whether or not we will try to give it hope to be a free people.*²

But the point is they're not a free people now -- under us. They're not a free people. And we cannot fight communism all over the world, and I think we should have learnt that lesson by now.

But the problem of veterans goes beyond this personal problem, because you think about a poster in this country with a picture of Uncle Sam and the picture says "I want you." And a young man comes out of high school and says, "That's fine. I'm going to serve my country." And he goes to Vietnam and he shoots and he kills and he does his job or maybe he doesn't kill, maybe he just goes and he comes back. When he gets back to this country he finds that he isn't really wanted, because the largest unemployment figure in the country -- it varies depending on who you get it from, the Veterans Administration 15 percent, various other sources 22 percent -- but the largest figure of unemployed in this country are veterans of this war. And of those veterans 33 percent of the unemployed are black. That means 1 out of every 10 of the nation's unemployed is a veteran of Vietnam.



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The hospitals across the country won't or can't meet their demands. It's not a question of not trying. They haven't got the appropriations. A man recently died after he had a tracheotomy in California, not because of the operation but because there weren't enough personnel to clean the mucous out of his tube and he suffocated to death.

Another young man just died in a New York VA hospital the other day. A friend of mine was lying in a bed two beds away and tried to help him, but he couldn't. They rang a bell and there was no one there to service that man, and so he died of convulsions.

Fifty-seven percent -- I understand 57 percent of all those entering VA hospitals talk about suicide. Some 27 percent have tried, and they try because they come back to this country and they have to face what they did in Vietnam, and then they come back and find the indifference of a country that doesn't really care, that doesn't really care.

And suddenly we are faced with a very sickening situation in this country because there's no moral indignation, and if there is it comes from people who are almost exhausted by their past indignancies, and I know that many of them are sitting in front of me. The country seems to have lied -- lain down and accepted something as serious as Laos, just as we calmly shrugged off the loss of 700,000 lives in Pakistan, the so-called greatest disaster of all times.

But we are here as veterans to say that we think we are in the midst of the greatest disaster of all times *now* because they are still dying over there, and not just Americans, Vietnamese, and we are rationalizing leaving that country so that those people can go on killing each other for years to come. Americans seem to have accepted the idea that the war is winding down, at least for Americans, and they have also allowed the bodies, which were once used by a President for statistics to prove that we were winning this war, to be used as evidence against a man who followed orders and who interpreted those orders no differently than hundreds of other men in South Vietnam.



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We veterans can only look with amazement on the fact that this country has not been able to see that there's absolutely no difference between a ground troop and a helicopter crew. And yet, people have accepted a differentiation fed them by the Administration. No ground troops are in Laos, so it's alright to kill Laotians by remote control. But believe me, the helicopter crews fill the same body bags and they wreak the same kind of damage on the Vietnamese and Laotian countryside as anyone else, and the President is talking about allowing that to go on for many years to come. And one can only ask if we will really be satisfied when the troops march in to Hanoi.

We are asking here in Washington for some action, action from the Congress of the United States of America which has the power to raise and maintain armies and which by the Constitution also has the power to declare war. We've come here, not to the President, because we believe that this body can be responsive to the will of the people; and we believe that the will of the people says that we should be out of Vietnam now.

We're here in Washington also to say that the problem of this war is not just a question of war and diplomacy. It's part and parcel of everything that we are trying as human beings to communicate to people in this country: the question of racism, which is rampant in the military; and so many other questions also: the use of weapons; the hypocrisy in our taking umbrage in the...Geneva Conventions and using that as justification for continuation of this war, when we are more guilty than any other body of violations of those Geneva Conventions -- in the use of free-fire zones, harassment interdiction fire, search and destroy missions, the bombings, the torture of prisoners, the killing of prisoners -- accepted policy by many units in South Vietnam. That's what we're trying to say. It's part and parcel of everything.

An American Indian friend of mine who lives on the Indian nation of Alcatraz put it to me very succinctly. He told me how as a boy on an Indian reservation he had watched television and he used to cheer the cowboys when they came in and shot the Indians. And then suddenly one day he stopped in Vietnam and he said, "My God, I'm doing to these people the very same thing that was done to my people," -- and he stopped. And that's what we're trying to say, that we think this thing has to end.



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We're also here to ask -- We are here to ask and we're here to ask vehemently, Where are the leaders of our country? Where is the leadership? We're here to ask: Where are McNamara, Rostow, Bundy³, Kilpatrick⁴, and so many others. Where are they now that we the men whom they sent off to war have returned? These are commanders who have deserted their troops and there is no more serious crime in the law of war. The Army says they never leave their wounded. The Marines say they never leave even their dead. These men have left all the casualties and retreated behind a pious shield of public rectitude. They've left the real stuff of their reputations, bleaching behind them in the sun in this country.

And finally, this Administration has done us the ultimate dishonor. They've attempted to disown us and the sacrifices we made for this country. In their blindness and fear, they have tried to deny that we are veterans or that we served in Nam. We do not need their testimony. Our own scars and stumps of limbs are witness enough for others; and for ourselves, we wish that a merciful God could wipe away our own memories of that service as easily as this Administration has wiped their memories of us.

But all that they have done and all that they can do by this denial is to make more clear than ever our own determination to undertake one last mission: to search out and destroy the last vestige of this barbaric war, to pacify our own hearts, to conquer the hate and fear that have driven this country these last 10 years and more.

And so, when 30 years from now our brothers go down the street without a leg, without an arm or a face, and small boys ask why, we will be able to say "Vietnam" and not mean a desert, not a filthy obscene memory but mean instead the place where America finally turned and where soldiers like us helped it in the turning.

Thank you.

* = content within asterisks absent from this audio and unverified as delivered. Extant video indicates that an (ostensibly small) portion of the proceedings occurring between the end of Senator Fulbright's introductory remarks and the beginning of Mr. Kerry's statement was clipped. The Congressional Record of the proceedings includes the opening salutation noted at the beginning of this transcript.



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¹ Source unverified

² Source unverified

³ Reference uncertain

⁴ Reference uncertain