

LI9-- "A SOLDIER FOR PEACE: THE JOHN KERRY I KNEW DURING THE VIETNAM WAR WAS FAR FROM THE RADICAL PORTRAYED BY THE BUSH CAMPAIGN. HE WAS A COURAGEOUS TRUTH-TELLER -- AND, CAUGHT IN A NEW INFERNO, THE COUNTRY COULD USE HIM AGAIN", SALON, 4/13/04

April 13, 2004 | Since the Bush team routinely practices character assassination on a scale not seen since Richard Nixon, it seems safe to predict that it will soon resume its effort to smear John Kerry for his courageous opposition to the war in Vietnam. In fact, Republicans are striving mightily to exploit talks the young antiwar leader had with delegations from both sides of the war in Paris in 1970 as proof of his traitorous ways. The media, as eager as ever to accommodate the GOP attack dogs, is apparently putting the story in play.

This follows the tempest stirred up by conservative groups earlier this year over a photo of Kerry and Jane Fonda at a Vietnam antiwar rally. Though they did attend the same event, the photo -- which showed them in close proximity -- was doctored. And in truth, Kerry and "Hanoi Jane," as the right wing demonized the antiwar movie star, had almost nothing to do with each other during the war.

President Bush is bound to attack Kerry's 1970s peace activism not only because he wants to distract attention from his own deepening quagmire in Iraq but also because he is at such a distinct character disadvantage on Vietnam. As a young man, Kerry displayed raw physical courage and won a Silver Star, Bronze Star and three Purple Hearts by fighting in a war he doubted, because he thought it was his patriotic duty to do so. Bush, on the other hand, avoided fighting in a war he supported. Bush forces must therefore try to replace the image of John Kerry as war hero with images of John Kerry as scruffy war protester.

While conservatives at the time sought to portray Kerry's opposition to the war as political opportunism, the opposite was true. Opposing the Nixon administration at the time was politically dangerous, as demonstrated both by Vice President Spiro Agnew's crude personal

attacks against Kerry and by the fact that the young activist lost his 1972 campaign for a congressional seat largely because of his antiwar positions. Kerry demonstrated the highest form of patriotism by risking his political future for the national good.

I am not aware of any other major political figure with electoral ambitions who had the moral courage to so publicly oppose the war. Returning veteran Al Gore, for example, chose not to align himself with Vietnam Veterans Against the War, Kerry's organization. Kerry's willingness to oppose the war showed real moral courage -- another striking contrast with George Bush's moral cowardice in avoiding public engagement on the major issue of his generation.

I am quite familiar with John Kerry's antiwar activism, since our paths crisscrossed in the early 1970s. After serving for four years in Laos as an educational advisor, like Kerry I returned to the United States determined to end the killing in Southeast Asia, and I was responsible for exposing the secret U.S. war in Laos. Most of the peace movement's focus during this period was on the ongoing slaughter of the people of Indochina, particularly since American casualties were dramatically dropping. In 1968, for example, 16,511 Americans died in Vietnam. In 1972 the number dropped to 551. Official Vietnamese casualties, by contrast, rose from 145,163 in 1971 to 236,536 in 1972. The numbers of Laotians and Cambodians killed by U.S. bombing in that year were not even estimated. Using official figures, my group -- Project Air War -- calculated that the Nixon administration killed, wounded or made homeless more than 6 million civilians between Jan. 20, 1969, and the fall of 1972. The United States dropped 6.7 million tons on Southeast Asia, or three times more than all U.S. bombing of Europe and the entire Pacific theater in World War II.

While Kerry was concerned with the growing civilian casualties in Southeast Asia during this period, as a leader of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War he was primarily focused on the plight of U.S. soldiers. His famous question to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee was, "How do you ask the last American to die for a mistake?" not, "How do you justify continuing to kill tens of thousands of Indochinese for a mistake?"

Kerry's focus on American suffering during this period thus made him a conservative within the peace movement and a moderate in the overall political spectrum. His views were consonant with those of Republican senators like Clifford Case of New Jersey, Charles Mathias of Maryland, and Jacob Javits of New York.

And Kerry was a political moderate in a deeper, more significant way. Most of us opposing the war during this period did not believe that electoral politics offered much hope of ending the war, let alone transforming America. I remember well that I fully expected to be working for peace in Indochina for the rest of my life. We were intent on building grass-roots movements to pressure politicians, not to run for office ourselves.

Kerry, by contrast, believed in electoral politics and sought to reform the system from within. He not only ran for office himself in 1972 but also consistently opposed the kind of radical rhetoric or gestures that he felt put the peace movement out of step with the American people. However one feels about his views, then or now, one thing is clear: He was no extremist.

I found this out for myself in the spring of 1971. I called Kerry to talk about the war, and he suggested a lunch in New York at the Yale Club.

Most of our discussion focused on my experience in Laos, where I had interviewed more than 1,000 refugees from the Plain of Jars, an ancient society that had been wiped off the face of the earth by American bombing. Kerry listened, asked questions, and was clearly moved. He was later to mention the bombing in his public appearances, including a debate on "The Dick Cavett Show."

But I remember being struck later by how different our approaches were. The Yale Club was an apt venue for our discussion. For it was clear that he had a far deeper faith in the ability of the political system to reform itself from within than did I or most people I knew in the peace movement. He was clearly moderate in temperament, and far closer to establishment views than I was.

The Bush campaign, of course, is eager to portray young Kerry in a far different light. They have seized on public statements he made in the early '70s in which he acknowledged that he and other U.S. soldiers had committed war crimes in Vietnam. "I committed the same kinds of atrocities as thousands of others in that I shot in free-fire zones, fired .50-caliber machine bullets, used harass-and-interdiction fire, joined in search-and-destroy missions, and burned villages," Kerry said on "Meet the Press" in April 1971. "All of these acts are contrary to the laws of the Geneva Convention, and all were ordered as written, established policies from the top down, and the men who ordered this are war criminals."

The problem for his conservative critics -- then and now -- is that Kerry is right. As numerous congressional and press investigations, as well as thousands of first-person accounts (including photographic records) from Vietnam veterans, have proved, the U.S. military was guilty of this and more in Southeast Asia.

In fact, the Toledo Blade just won a Pulitzer Prize for unearthing yet more shocking evidence of U.S. war crimes in Vietnam. The Blade's award-winning exposé focused on the bloody rampages of an elite Army paratrooper unit, the so-called Tiger Force, whose war crimes against Vietnamese civilians were covered up by government officials, including Donald Rumsfeld. As reported in Salon, the Blade "uncovered for the first time that a secret four-year Army investigation had concluded that 18 members of Tiger Force had committed war crimes, but no charges were ever brought. Instead, the investigation was simply filed away in 1975, during Donald Rumsfeld's first run as secretary of defense."

John Kerry was thus being neither radical nor extremist in reporting what he and other U.S. soldiers did. He was simply telling the truth. His willingness to speak painful truths about American policy -- in the face of withering attacks from the right -- displayed the kind of character we badly need in a president.

The Bush administration drove the country to war in Iraq by brazenly manipulating the truth, and we now find ourselves alone, encircled by flames. It will take a leader with the honesty and integrity that Kerry displayed during the Vietnam War to get us out of this inferno.

About the writer

Fred Branfman is a Santa Barbara, Calif., writer. Between 1971 and 1975, he was director of Project Air War and the Indochina Resource Center in Washington.