

The gods of war: Investigating Bob Kerrey

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Did Bob Kerrey commit a war crime in Vietnam when his navy squadron killed unarmed women and children? Or were the killings in Thanh Phong accidents of war, the kind of terrible mistakes that even the most careful soldiers make in the fog of battle? We don't know the answer. Kerrey insists that the actions that have haunted him for 30 years were within the range of proper military conduct, but the facts are murky in Kerrey's own account, and his version is disputed by others. Unfortunately, military officials and political leaders do not seem prepared even to pursue the questions.

In the wake of Kerrey's statements on the events at Thanh Phong in 1969, many veterans stepped forward to support the former Nebraska senator. They vividly recalled the horrible stresses of fighting in Vietnam, where enemy soldiers were often indistinguishable from civilians, and where women and children were enlisted by the Vietcong in guerrilla warfare. The Vietnam veterans in the Senate all declared that the Pentagon should not investigate Kerrey's story. "Our job," said John McCain (R., Ariz.), "is to heal the wounds of war and not reopen them because of any specific incidents." Max Cleland (D., Ga.) and Charles Hagel (R., Neb.) said in a joint statement, "Many people have been forced to do things in war that they are deeply ashamed of later." It would be a mistake, they said, "to blame the warrior instead of the war."

But blaming "the war" is precisely the wrong thing to do. If "the war" is to blame for everything, then there is no reason to make distinctions between proper and improper conduct, whether by soldiers on the field or by generals making policy.

Central to all notions of "justifiable war" is the principle that civilians are immune from combat. The fact that this principle has been violated many times does not mean that it should be violated. Nor does the fact that this principle is often difficult to implement mean that soldiers are not obliged to do so. It is precisely because the

principle is difficult to implement that rules of military conduct are formulated.

An official investigation of the firefight at Thanh Phong may well prove that Kerrey acted responsibly. It may indicate that it was the policies of Kerrey's commanders that were at fault. It may bring increased scrutiny of the military decisions that made the Thanh Phong region a "free fire zone." In any case, an official investigation would assert that military activity is conducted by human beings, who are responsible for their behavior. When humans lose that conviction, then they have truly surrendered to the gods of war.