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Review of *When I Was a Young Man: A Memoir* By Bob Kerrey

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When I Was a Young Man: A Memoir. By Bob Kerrey. New York: Harcourt, Inc., 2002. xi + 270 pp. Photographs. \$26.00 cloth, \$14.00 paper.

Bob Kerrey's memoir begins with a promise to his dying father to find out what happened to the father's brother, lost in the Philippines during WWII. This Kerrey did, but instead of writing his uncle's story, he wrote his own, of growing up in the 1950s in Lincoln, Nebraska, one of seven children in a solid, church-going, middle-class family. "We biked everywhere," Kerrey writes. "The edge of the universe lay at the ends of the dirt roads leading to those places where the wild and wooly frontier began." The fearful things in this safe place were either abstract (Soviet and Martian invasions) or very concrete (spring floods). In the plainest of plain prose, Kerrey records his high school ambitions (to defy his asthma and make the football team like his older brother) and his years at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, where he majored in pharmacy. Although one of his college girlfriends joined the Freedom Riders in 1961, Kerrey confesses that he himself "knew or cared little about the world outside Lincoln." Looking back, he both loves his childhood and marvels at how fully he accepted its limitations. Yet a note of self-justification intrudes even when he is self-critical: he joined a fraternity with exclusionary membership clauses because he wanted to belong; but he credits the fraternity with giving him "a chance to lead" when he was elected its president. He does not ask himself whom he was leading nor toward what end.

In 1966, Kerrey received his draft notice and instead volunteered for the navy and its special forces unit, the SEALs. His attitude toward the war was passive: he could not

imagine refusing to serve but hoped it would end before he had to go. Kerrey's analysis of the war is brief, superficial, and contradictory. He knew little about the conflict when he volunteered and seems not to have learned a great deal since. He is content to believe that the US intervened in the war out of a desire to secure the "freedom and self-determination of the South Vietnamese," that in the delta, where he fought, people sympathized "with whomever they feared most," and that the North Vietnamese defeated the US because "we lost the battle for public opinion not only in the United States but also in South Vietnam's countryside." He does not explain why South Vietnamese opinion mattered, if fear alone determined people's sympathies.

One dark February night in 1969, Kerrey led his team into the delta village of Thanh Phong, which, the South Vietnamese district chief had assured him, contained no civilians since the entire village was loyal to the National Liberation Front. The goal was to kill or capture high level enemy officials supposedly meeting in the village. First, the inhabitants of a house on the outskirts of the village are killed for fear they would warn the others. Kerrey "did not have to give an order to begin the killing but I could have stopped it and didn't." He leaves out who lived in the house: two grandparents and five grandchildren. Next, the team searched several houses in the village, finding no meeting and no men. Meanwhile the women and children had gathered outside the houses, talking loudly. "We had two choices: withdraw or continue to search the houses in the dark." The choice was apparently made for them: a shot rang out and Kerrey's team responded with "a tremendous barrage of fire...." Here Kerrey hides behind the passive voice: "I saw women and children in front of us being hit and cut to pieces." At least one member of Kerrey's team has disputed this version of events, making Kerrey a direct agent in the killing of the family on the outskirts of the village and denying there had been hostile fire in the village. Kerrey himself claims not to remember exactly what hap-

pened. He does recall feeling "a sickness in my heart for what we had done." But his main concern, repeated several times, is that he had lost his innocence. Later, in the hospital recovering from wounds received in another operation (for which he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor), he grieved for "my lost innocence, which could never be re-attached to my spirit." Out of the hospital and back in Nebraska, he is haunted night and day by "the loss of my innocence and the death of innocents...." He comes close to suicide but rejects it out of a conviction that "I could give meaning to the lives of the people I saw in my dreams only by choosing life." How living his successful, if haunted, life might give meaning to the Vietnamese women and children he killed is left unexplored. Kerrey lost his innocence, but neither to himself nor to his countrymen does that make him guilty, nor even responsible for what was wrought in Vietnam.

What finally disappoints in this memoir is not Kerrey's failure to resolve the contradictions which multiply as one reads, but his unwillingness to confront them. Thus, at the Nixon Medal of Honor ceremony there was "something heroic," he writes, "about American men who were willing to travel to that strange country and fight for the freedom of people they did not know or understand." What freedom had to do with the deaths in Thanh Phong is anyone's guess.

When, decades later, Gregory Vistica reported the death of thirteen civilians at the hands of Kerrey's SEAL team, the reaction of the country was to feel sorry for Kerrey and for his lost innocence. As the Vietnam veteran and Massachusetts senator, John Kerry, argued, if you were going to judge Bob Kerrey, "you'd have to investigate the whole war" (quoted in Jonathan Schell, "Bob Kerrey's Vietnam," *The Nation*, May 8, 2001). That is a task neither the government nor Bob Kerrey has been ready to undertake.

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