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Transcript: Kerry Testifies Before Senate Panel, 1971

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Following is a transcript of John Kerry's statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on April 22, 1971, in which he criticized the Vietnam War.

Mr. Kerry: 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, not isolated incidents but crimes committed on a day-to-day basis with the full awareness of officers at all levels of command.

Highlights of Kerry's 1971 Senate Appearance

Hear Kerry On:

- Atrocities of War
- Anger of Vietnam Veterans
- A Turning Point for America

Commentary: Listening Again to Lt. John Kerry on Vietnam

It is impossible to describe to you exactly what did happen in Detroit, the emotions in the room, 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 at times they had personally raped, cut off ears, cut off heads, tape 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 fashion reminiscent of Genghis Khan, shot cattle and dogs for fun, poisoned food stocks, and generally ravaged the country side 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.

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Article continues after sponsor message

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

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; 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, no reds, and not redcoats but the crimes which we are committing that threaten it, that we have to speak out.

I would like to talk to you a little bit about what the result is of the feelings these men carry with them after coming back from Vietnam. The country doesn't know it yet, but it has 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 history; men who have returned with a sense of anger and a sense of betrayal which no one has yet grasped.

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As a veteran and one who feels this anger, I would like to talk about it. We are 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 freedom which most of those misfits abuse" and this was used as a rallying point for our effort in Vietnam.

But for us, as 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. Hence the anger of some of the men who are here in Washington today. It is a distortion because we in no way consider 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 can not consider ourselves America's best men when we are ashamed of and hated what we were called on 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 use the height of criminal hypocrisy, and it is that kind of hypocrisy which we feel has torn this country apart.

We are probably much more angry than that and I don't want to go into the foreign policy aspects because I am outclassed here. I know that all of you talk about every possible alternative of getting out of Vietnam. We understand that. We know you have considered the seriousness of the aspects to the utmost level and I am not going to try to deal on that, but I want to relate to you the feeling that many of the men who have

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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 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 money 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.

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 who hand out chocolate bars and chewing gum.

We learned the meaning of free fire zones, shooting anything that moves, and we watched while America placed a cheapness on the lives of Orientals.

We watched the U.S. 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

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do not believe this country would dream of using were we fighting in the 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 high for the reoccupation by the North Vietnamese 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 Khe Sanhs and Hill 881's and Fire Base 6's and so many others.

Now we are 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... *(Applause)*

The Chairman: I hope you won't interrupt. He is making a very significant statement. 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 the United States doesn't have to admit something that the entire world already knows, so that we can't say that we have made a mistake. Someone has to die so that President Nixon won't be, and these are his words, "the first President to lose a war."

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 are trying to do that, and we are 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. But the point is they are not a free people now under us. They are not a free people, and we cannot fight communism all over the world, and I think we should have learned that lesson by now.

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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 is fine. I am 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, and 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 VA Administration 15 percent, various other sources 22 percent. But the largest corps 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.

The hospitals across the country won't, or can't meet their demands. It is not a question of not trying. They don't have 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. He rang a bell and there was nobody there to service that man and so he died of convulsions.

I understand 57 percent of all those entering the 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.

Suddenly we are faced with a very sickening situation in this country, because there is no moral indignation and, if there is, it comes from people who are almost exhausted by their past indignations, and I know that many of them are sitting in front of me. The country seems to have lain down and shrugged off 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 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 seems 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 that 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 Vietnam.

We veterans can only look with amazement on the fact that this country has been unable to see there is absolutely no difference between ground troops and a helicopter crew, and yet people have accepted a differentiation fed them by the administration.

No ground troops are in Laos, so it is all right 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 anybody else, and the President is talking about allowing that to go on for many years to come. One can only ask if we will really be satisfied only when the troops march into 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 have 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 are here in Washington also to say that the problem of this war is not just a question of war and diplomacy. It is 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 a continuation of this war, when we are more guilty than any other

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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 is what we are trying to say. It is party and parcel of everything.

An American Indian friend of mine who lives in the Indian Nation at 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 am doing to these people the very same thing that was done to my people." And he stopped. And that is what we are trying to say, that we think this thing has to end.

We are also here to ask, and we are here to ask vehemently, where are the leaders of our country? Where is the leadership? We are here to ask where are McNamara, Rostow, Bundy, Gilpatric 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 have left the real stuff of their reputation bleaching behind them in the sun in this country.

Finally, this administration has done us the ultimate dishonor. They have attempted to disown us and the sacrifice 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 witnesses 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 barbarous war, to pacify our own hearts, to conquer the hate and the fear that have driven this country these last 10 years and more and so when, in 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. *(Applause)*

The Chairman: Mr. Kerry, it is quite evident from that demonstration that you are speaking not only for yourself but for all your associates, as you properly said in the beginning. You said you wished to communicate. I can't imagine anyone communicating more eloquently than you did. I think it is extremely helpful and beneficial to the committee and the country to have you make such a statement. You said you had been awake all night. I can see that you spent that time very well indeed. *(Laughter)*

Perhaps that was the better part, better that you should be awake than otherwise.

You have said that the question before this committee and the Congress is really how to end the war. The resolutions about which we have been hearing testimony during the past several days, the sponsors of which are some members of this committee, are seeking the most practical way that we can find and, I believe, to do it at the earliest opportunity that we can. That is the purpose of these hearing and that is why you were brought here.

You have been very eloquent about the reasons why we should proceed as quickly as possible. Are you familiar with some of the proposals before this committee?

Mr. Kerry: Yes, I am, Senator.

The Chairman: Do you support or do you have any particular views about any one of them you wish to give the committee?

Mr. Kerry: My feeling, Senator, is undoubtedly this Congress, and I don't mean to sound pessimistic, but I do not believe that this Congress will, in fact, end the war as we would like to, which is immediately and unilaterally and, therefore, if I were to speak I would say we would set a date and the date obviously would be the earliest possible date. But I would like to say, in answering that, that I do not believe it is

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necessary to stall any longer. I have been to Paris. I have talked with both delegations at the peace talks, that is to say the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the Provisional Revolutionary Government and of all eight of Madam Binh's points it has been stated time and time again, and was stated by Senator Vance Hartke when he returned from Paris, and it has been stated by many other officials of this Government, if the United States were to set a date for withdrawal the prisoners of war would be returned.

I think this negates very clearly the argument of the President that we have to maintain a presence in Vietnam, to use as a negotiating block for the return of those prisoners. The setting of a date will accomplish that.

As to the argument concerning the danger to our troops were we to withdraw or state that we would, they have also said many times in conjunction with that statement that all of our troops, the moment we set a date, will be given safe conduct out of South Vietnam. The only other important point is that we allow the South Vietnamese people to determine their own future and that ostensibly is what we have been fighting for anyway.

I would, therefore, submit that the most expedient means of getting out of South Vietnam would be for the President of the United States to declare a cease-fire, to stop this blind commitment to a dictatorial regime, the Thieu-Ky-Khiem regime, accept a coalition regime which would represent all the political forces of the country which is in fact what a representative government is supposed to do and which is in fact what this Government here in this country purports to do, and pull the troops out without losing one more American, and still further without losing the South Vietnamese.

Senator Symington: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Kerry, please move your microphone. You have a Silver Star; have you not?

Mr. Kerry: Yes, I do.

Senator Symington: And a Purple Heart?

Mr. Kerry: Yes, I do.

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Senator Symington: How many clusters?

Mr. Kerry: Two clusters.

Senator Symington: So you have been wounded three times.

Mr. Kerry: Yes, sir.

Senator Symington: I have no further questions, Mr. Chairman.

The Chairman: Senator Aiken. *(Applause)*

Senator Aiken: Mr. Kerry, the Defense Department seems to feel that if we set a definite date for withdrawal when our forces get down to a certain level, they would be seriously in danger by the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong. Do you believe that the North Vietnamese would undertake to prevent our withdrawal from the country and attack the troops that remain there?

Mr. Kerry: Well, Senator, if I may answer you directly, I believe we are running that danger with the present course of withdrawal because the President has neglected to state to this country exactly what his response will be when we have reached the point that we do have, let us say, 50,000 support troops in Vietnam.

Senator Aiken: I am not telling you what I think. I am telling what the Department says.

Mr. Kerry: Yes, sir; I understand that.

Senator Aiken: Do you believe the North Vietnamese would seriously undertake to impede our complete withdrawal?

Mr. Kerry: No, I do not believe that the North Vietnamese would and it has been clearly indicated at the Paris peace talks they would not.

Senator Aiken: Do you think they might help carry the bags for us? *(Laughter)*

Mr. Kerry: I would say they would be more prone to do that than the Army of the South Vietnamese. *(Laughter) (Applause)*

Senator Aiken: I think your answer is ahead of my question. *(Laughter)*

Senator Aiken: But what I would like to know now is if we, as we complete our withdrawal and, say, get down to 10,000, 20,000, 30,000 or even 50,000 troops there, would there be any effort on the part of the South Vietnamese government of the South Vietnamese army, in your opinion, to impede their withdrawal?

Mr. Kerry: No; I don't think so, Senator.

Senator Aiken: I don't see why North Vietnam should object.

Mr. Kerry: I don't for the simple reason, I used to talk with officers about their- we asked them, and one officer took great pleasure in playing with me in the sense that he would say, "Well, you know you American, you come over here for 1 year and you can afford, you know, you go to Hong Kong for R. & R. and if you are a good boy you get another R. & R. or something you know. You can afford to charge bunkers, but I have to try and be here for 30 years and stay alive." And I think that that really is the governing principle by which those people are now living and have been allowed to live because of our mistake. So that when we in fact state, let us say, that we will have a cease-fire or have a coalition government, most of the 2 million men you often hear quoted under arms, most of whom are regional popular reconnaissance forces, which is to say militia, and a very poor militia at that, will simply lay down their arms, if they haven't done so already, and not fight. And I think you will find they will respond to whatever government evolves which answer their needs, and those needs quite simply are to be fed, to bury their dead in plots where their ancestors lived, to be allowed to extend their culture, to try and exist as human beings. And I think that is what will happen.

I can cite many, many instances, sir, as in combat when these men refused to fight with us, when they shot with their guns over tin this area like this and their heads

turned facing the other way. When we were taken under fire we Americans, supposedly fighting with them, and pinned down in a ditch, and I was in the Navy and this was pretty unconventional, but when we were pinned down in a ditch recovering bodies or something and they refused to come in and help us, point blank refused. I don't believe they want to fight, sir.

Senator Aiken: Do you think we are under obligation to furnish them with extensive economic assistance?

Mr. Kerry: Yes, sir. I think we have a very definite obligation to make extensive reparations to the people of Indochina.

Senator Pell: Wouldn't you agree with me though that what he did in herding old men, women and children into a trench and then shooting them was a little bit beyond the perimeter of even what has been going on in this war and that that action should be discouraged. There are other actions not that extreme that have gone on and have been permitted. If we had not taken action or cognizance of it, it would have been even worse. It would have indicated we encouraged this kind of action.

Mr. Kerry: My feeling, Senator, on Lieutenant Calley is what he did quite obviously was a horrible, horrible, horrible thing and I have no bone to pick with the fact that he was prosecuted. But I think that in this question you have to separate guilt from responsibility, and I think clearly the responsibility for what has happened there lies elsewhere.

I think it lies with the men who designed free fire zones. I think it lies with the men who encourage body counts. I think it lies in large part with this country, which allows a young child before he reaches the age of 14 to see 12,500 deaths on television, which glorifies the John Wayne syndrome, which puts out fighting man comic books on the stands, which allows us in training to do calisthenics to four counts, on the fourth count of which we stand up and shout "kill" in unison, which has posters in barracks in this country with a crucified Vietnamese, blood on him, and underneath it says "kill

the gook," and I think that clearly the responsibility for all of this is what has produced this horrible aberration. 99

Now, I think if you are going to try Lieutenant Calley then you must at the same time, if this country is going to demand respect for the law, you must at the same time try all those other people who have responsibility, and any aversion that we may have to the verdict as veterans is not to say that Calley should be freed, not to say that he is innocent, but to say that you can't just take him alone.

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