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Johnny We Hardly Knew You - John Kerry: War Hero or Warrior for Peace?

by Sharleen Leahey

This past Sunday night (7/25/04) MSNBC broadcast a phenomenal documentary entitled John Kerry: Bringing the War Home. It told the story of young Kerry after he returned home from Vietnam, disillusioned and outraged by a war he called criminal. One of the most memorable images from that documentary was John Kerry leading a long line of anti-war veterans through the streets of Washington D.C., raising not a fistful hand, but two fingers for peace. I took a deep breath when I saw that moving image. Imagine . . . a man leading a peace march through the streets of DC is now running for President of the United States! The same man who challenged many of his peers, elders and the hostile administration of Richard Nixon and bravely, without apologies, and at great personal risk, spoke truth to power is now within reach of becoming our next President. I began to dream that perhaps this same man could just maybe lead us out of a "war without end."

In April 1971 John Kerry became a spokesman for a week-long action by over one thousand Vietnam veterans who were determined to shut down the U.S. war machine which was destroying not only hundreds of thousands of American lives but was committing genocide against a small nation inhabited by millions of peasant farmers who posed no threat to the United States of America. As the Nixon Administration vilified the protesters as being unpatriotic and not representative of the vast majority of the nation's proud veterans, John Kerry's eloquence and passionate defense of their rebellion gained the attention of the national press corps and led to his testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee chaired by Senator Fulbright. On that day John Kerry declared not only his anger and pain but also his love for America . . . he spoke from his heart that somehow we had the power to be a truly great nation if we could muster the courage to face the horrible truth about what we were doing, not only to the Vietnamese people . . . but to ourselves. He emphasized the urgent need to change direction to ensure a decent future for our children and for the world. In calm measured tones but with an emotional honesty that was palpable, he explained why our policies and actions in Vietnam were not only a mistake, but constituted a crime against humanity. He also told of the awful cost being paid in the wasted lives of American soldiers who were being killed, maimed and traumatized for "the biggest nothing in history." There is one statement John Kerry made that day which I hope will always be etched in our collective national memory:

"How do you ask a man to be the last to die for a mistake?"

As an insane, brutal slaughter of millions of innocent people 10,000 miles overseas was raging John Kerry's willingness to publicly speak the ugly truth about a war he had not only witnessed, but had participated in, galvanized this nation. Despite being personally attacked by pro-war veterans groups and politicians who accused him of being "ambitious" and "a traitor", John Kerry went on to tour the country, speaking out passionately against the war wherever he could get a hearing. Senator Ted Kennedy, looking back on those days, expressed his sincere conviction that John Kerry's extraordinary anti-war activism in 1971 made a great contribution to convincing Americans that our country must change course and leave Vietnam. Four years later, our country finally did leave Vietnam . . . but dreams of empire die hard.

Our latest imperial misadventure has led us into another quagmire thousands of miles away in a tortured country called Iraq. As a young man still in his early twenties, John Kerry seized a rare opportunity to reach millions with an alternative message for peace and he rose to the occasion brilliantly. Now over thirty-three years later I sit in my living room and watch a vastly different scenario being played out as John Kerry is presented to the American people as a candidate for the Presidency of the United States. But just how is he being presented?

On Monday, July 26, 2004, the first evening of the 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston, Massachusetts I sat listening to a speech by Rev. David Alston, a middle-aged African American man who served on a swift boat under John Kerry during the Vietnam War. As the eminent Democratic nominee for the highest office in the land, John Kerry's courage and strength are being extolled before a nation hungry for leadership. But wait, it's not about the courage he showed that day in front of Senator 1 Senate Foreign Relations Committee. It's not about the strength he showed under fire from the Nixon White House as he steadfastly spoke out against his government's war policy despite being continually slandered and smeared in the press. No, the "courage" being referred to on the floor of the Democratic National Convention is his courage as commander of a combat unit fighting the Vietnamese who were described several times as "the enemy." Is this the same war that John Kerry himself turned against with such vehemence over three decades ago? No doubt, it took a great deal of courage and strength to survive the awful firefights and life and death encounters Kerry and his crew endured during those awful four months in Vietnam. But after coming home Kerry spent a great deal more time fighting against the war than fighting in it.

Why is John Kerry's history as a peacemaker and war critic now being downplayed and replaced by the tired, archaic and extremely dangerous rhetoric of war-heroism? After enduring three years of George Bush's "war without end", why is Kerry's most magnificent shining moments of glory as a warrior for peace not presented to the eyes of a war-weary nation sick of endless lies and violence of the past 3-1/2 years?

Surely the brutality and blatant deceptions perpetrated by the Bush Administration in its illegal war against Iraq is obvious to the vast majority of Americans as well as to most people in nations throughout the world. Why is the establishment of the Democratic Party losing this great opportunity to declare its commitment to peacemaking and a real change in direction for our beleaguered nation? Why, in the words of young John Kerry, should the Democratic Party follow in the footsteps of the Republican Party in asking a young man or woman to be the last to die for a mistake?

Millions upon millions of Americans who are yearning for peace will be voting for president this coming November. Let us take a lesson from the young John Kerry and raise our voices loudly, clearly and without fear for what we believe is the moral and just path for our nation. Hopefully the older John Kerry will listen and take a lesson from his younger self . . . re-connecting with the wisdom, moral vision and depth of character he showed to the world all those years ago. Surely too many innocent people have already died for the lies and mistakes of those who have called themselves our leaders.

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