

Primary Source: John Kerry testifies against the Vietnam War before the U.S. Senate in 1971

By John Kerry, adapted by Newsela staff on 01.02.20

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John Kerry asked the Senate to recognize the problems of America's involvement in the Vietnam War on April 22, 1971. Image: Getty Images/Bettmann.

Editor's Note: On April 22, 1971, John Kerry offered testimony to the U.S. Senate. A veteran of the Vietnam War himself, Kerry was the director of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. He criticized American involvement in the conflict between communist North Vietnam and South Vietnam, a U.S. ally. The following excerpts come from Kerry's testimony.

"These Crimes Were Committed Daily"

I would like to talk, representing all those Vietnam veterans. 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. These were not rare incidents. These crimes were committed daily. Officers at all levels of command were fully aware of it.

There is nothing that could happen in South Vietnam to realistically threaten the United States of America. That is our opinion, based on our experience. And to claim the loss of one American life

in Vietnam is linked to losing preservation of freedom? That is the height of criminal hypocrisy, or dishonesty. We feel that such hypocrisy has torn this country apart. ...

Once in Vietnam, we found that this was a civil war. It was an effort by a people seeking liberation from colonial influence. We were also misled about the Vietnamese who were supposed to support us. They were less than willing to fight against the threat we were supposedly saving them from.

We found most people in Vietnam knew little about the reasons for the war. They didn't even know the difference between communism and democracy.

"They Wanted To Be Left Alone In Peace"

The Vietnamese people only wanted to work in rice fields without being bombed by helicopters. They wanted to live without the chemical napalm burning their villages. They wanted to be left alone in peace. They were trying to survive. They often did this by siding with whichever military force was present at a particular time — the communist Vietcong in South Vietnam, North Vietnamese, or American.

We found this, as well: American men were dying in those rice fields because allies did not come to their aid.

We saw how American taxes were used to support South Vietnam's corrupt government. We saw that many Americans had a false idea of who was kept free by our flag. In fact, black troops provided the highest percentage of American casualties. We saw Vietnam torn apart equally by American bombs as well as Vietcong attacks. Yet we listened while this country blamed all the destruction on the Vietcong.

"We Saw America Lose Her Sense Of Morals"

We rationalized destroying villages in order to save them. We saw America lose her sense of morals. She coolly accepted her own troops murdering hundreds of Vietnamese during the massacre at My Lai in 1968. At the same time, she refused to give up her idealistic image of American soldiers handing out chocolate bars and chewing gum.

We learned the meaning of free-fire zones, when everything that moves is shot. We watched while America placed a cheapness on the lives of Asians.

We watched the United States falsify body counts. We listened while month after month we were told the back of the enemy was about to break. We fought using terrifying weapons on them; weapons which I do not believe this country would dream of using were we fighting a European enemy.

In order for the United States to wash her hands of Vietnam, each day someone has to give up his life. The main reason? So the United States doesn't have to admit that we have made a mistake. Someone has to die so that President Nixon won't be "the first President to lose a war." Those are his words.

"Asking For Action From Congress"

We are asking Americans to think about what we are doing in this war. Because how do you ask a man to be the last man to die in Vietnam? How do ask a man to be the last man to die for a

mistake? ...

We are asking for action from Congress. Congress has the power to raise and maintain armies. The Constitution gives them 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. We believe that the will of the people says that we should be out of Vietnam now.