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The Election Isn't about Vietnam

by Sheldon Richman

What a topsy-turvy election! One candidate chose to fight in Vietnam. One candidate avoided it. So which candidate is supported by opponents of the Vietnam war? As I said, topsy-turvy.

We hear lots of people say that the election should be about terrorism, Iraq, Medicare, Social Security, the budget — not about a war that ended 30 years ago and what the candidates did or didn't do while it raged. But the current discussion isn't really about Vietnam. It's about honesty and hypocrisy; in other words, it's about character.

The candidates of the major parties both stand accused of lying about their records. Maybe the charges are false. More likely, neither candidate has told the full story. Regardless, this is not a debate about the Vietnam war, and it's a distraction from the real issue to insist that it is.

Imagine a candidate who said, "On principle, I oppose aggressive, nondefensive wars, which is what the U.S. government's conduct in Vietnam amounted to. Therefore, I used every means at my disposal to avoid fighting in that war and to persuade others that the government should stop its killing." Who could fail to respect such a person? His position would be consistent and principled. It would have no taint of cynicism or political calculation.

Neither President George W. Bush nor Sen. John Kerry can lay claim to such respect. Their positions reek with hypocrisy. Bush chose not to go to Vietnam when others were being compelled to. Instead, he used family connections to get into the Texas Air National Guard. Whatever else can be said about the National Guard, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was an escape from Vietnam. Why do you think the waiting lists were so long?

When Tim Russert asked Bush on *Meet the Press* last spring if he favored the war, he answered, "I supported my government." But apparently not strongly enough to rush over there. Bush's response was revealingly tepid and perfunctory. According to the war's supporters, it was a critical battle for freedom, not only for the Vietnamese, but ultimately for the American people themselves, since the North Vietnamese and Vietcong represented international communism. But all Bush could say is, "I supported my government." I detect some reluctance there.

Maybe he sensed that an enthusiastic endorsement would have brought questions about his avoidance. Just to be sure, he added, “And I would have gone had my unit been called up, by the way.” Easy to say that now. (*New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof writes that according to Bush’s former Guard roommate, Bush “inquired in 1970 about the possibility of transferring to Vietnam but was turned down.” If so, why didn’t he mention that to Russert? Better question: why didn’t he join the army?)

The upshot is that even if Bush attended all his meetings, he has been unwilling to acknowledge that he had privileged access to an exemption from combat that others wished they had but didn’t have. And he has refused to condemn the military draft, which compelled people without connections to kill and risk being killed in Vietnam.

He could partly make amends by canceling draft registration by executive order. How about it, Mr. President?

Kerry’s story is more roundabout. He volunteered for Vietnam, although he opposed the war while in college. When he came home, he denounced the war and admitted to participating in atrocities. He threw medals or ribbons, his or someone else’s, over the White House fence in protest. Now he boasts about his “service.” (That kind of service the Vietnamese peasants in free-fire zones could have done without.)

This is hypocrisy. Kerry wants to be president of the United States. He apparently has aspired to that job since he was in college. Perhaps that’s why he volunteered for a war he believed to be immoral — a combat record never hurts. But he’s calculated that the swing voters don’t want him to condemn the war, as he did in 1971 and as his own political base would love. Kerry has taken many positions on many issues, but I expect that he’ll stick to his new support for the Vietnam war through election day.

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