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# How a U.S.-Backed University in Vietnam Unleashed Old Demons

***Former Senator Bob Kerrey thought he could help heal the wounds of war. Instead, he reopened them.***

By **ISABELLE TAFT**

HO CHI MINH CITY, Vietnam – On May 25, 2016, Secretary of State John Kerry took the stage at the luxury Rex Hotel in downtown Ho Chi Minh City. Earlier on their trip together, President Barack Obama had announced a major development in a project Kerry had championed: The Vietnamese government had granted a license for Fulbright University Vietnam, the country's first independent, private and nonprofit liberal arts university. About $40 million from the U.S. government would go toward the project, along with 25 hectares of rent-free land donated by the Ho Chi Minh City government. On this day, the two countries would officially mark the milestone.

In his remarks, Kerry recalled sitting at the Rex's rooftop bar while on leave from his naval post in the Mekong Delta, and reflected on how much had changed. During the Vietnam War, the Rex had been the site of daily press briefings in which the American military recited body counts as a sign of success. Now, Fulbright University Vietnam, a Vietnamese institution inspired by the American educational tradition, would represent "the next big step forward" in U.S.-Vietnam relations, Kerry said – a chance for former foes to show how far they had come from the battlefield by building something together. The undergraduate students who will attend FUV starting this coming fall "are far more interested in plugging into the world economy than in being stuck in the past or reliving memories of events that took place long before they were born," Kerry said. The war, he said, "opened wounds that have taken decades to heal. Today is about a different kind of reality."

Kerry announced that the president of the university would be Dam Bich Thuy, the former general director of ANZ Vietnam, the national branch of the Australian bank, who had been one of the first Vietnamese students to study as a Fulbright scholar in the United States. The chairman of the board of trustees would be former Senator Bob Kerrey, who served in Vietnam as a Navy SEAL and was known in the Senate as a strong supporter of U.S.-Vietnam reconciliation. Kerrey came on stage to accept a certificate from Ho Chi Minh City officials.
In the audience, Ton Nu Thi Ninh, whose 20-year diplomatic career included a post as Vietnam's ambassador to the European Union, was aghast. On February 25, 1969, Kerrey led an operation in the Mekong Delta village of Thanh Phong, aiming to kill local Viet Cong leaders.

His Navy team reported they had killed 21 Viet Cong, which earned Kerrey a Bronze Star; in fact, at least 20 women, children and elderly men lay dead in the village. Not a single Viet Cong fighter was killed. The deaths were unknown until 2001, when the *New York Times Magazine* and "60 Minutes II" published an account of the events. At the time, some, including the Vietnamese government, called for Kerrey to be charged with war crimes. He apologized, and the outcry subsided, as American commentators, including then-Senator John Kerry, largely concluded that Bob Kerrey himself was a victim of an unjust war. As a high-level Vietnamese official, Ninh had met Kerrey before and says she welcomed his involvement in education initiatives. But she was shocked that he had accepted a top leadership position at a university meant to symbolize newly warm ties between Vietnam and America.
"How can those closely involved in this choice be so insensitive?" Ninh said in an interview in January. "We set the past aside and we move forward. We want to make friends, but not everything goes."

*Navy Lt. Joseph Robert Kerrey (third from left) stands with President Richard Nixon during a Medal of Honor ceremony in Washington on May 14, 1970. | AP Photo*

Within days, Ninh's shock was echoed in the fiercest public discussion of the war that Vietnam has witnessed in the age of social media. A reporter who studied journalism in the United States as a Fulbright scholar wrote an article on the Vietnamese news site Zing recounting Kerrey's actions in Thanh Phong. That was followed by an avalanche of coverage and sometimes tense commentary on Facebook, which is a relatively new platform for discourse in Vietnam beyond the strictly controlled state media; some people joked that FUV should be called "unfriend university." "One need only sit for a few minutes in a café to hear competing lines of argument" on the issue, wrote Bao Ninh, a veteran and author of the novel *The Sorrow of War*.

On one side of the debate were those who, like Ninh, argued that Kerrey's appointment betrayed a callous disregard for Vietnamese suffering during the war and an erasure of the memory of those who had been killed. "Please tell me the name of any prestigious university in this world, where a killer in cold blood of women and children – he admitted it and he is not charged for it – could be the president," Bao Anh Thai, a Ho Chi Minh City lawyer, wrote on Facebook. On the other side were those, including many North Vietnamese veterans, who believed that embracing Kerrey's role at FUV would fittingly symbolize the reconciliation of U.S.-Vietnam relations since the war. "Someone who once committed a horrific, evil massacre against a previous generation is chosen to support future Vietnamese generations," television host Quoc Khanh wrote on Facebook. "What is that if not healing?"

As the debate raged across Vietnam in May and June 2016 – a rare instance of public friction with the United States – Kerrey said he had no plans to step aside and would focus his efforts on fundraising for the university. The discussion faded – in part because the Vietnamese government, believing the issue had become too sensitive, instructed local media to stop covering it, according to Thomas Vallely, a senior adviser at the Harvard Kennedy School who has guided the establishment of FUV.

In early 2017, a change was quietly made within the FUV board: Thuy, the university president, would serve as de facto chair, while Kerrey remained a board member. Thuy says the Vietnamese government decided the chair needed to be available in Vietnam to sign papers and meet regulatory requirements. (Kerrey lives in New York.) Still, Kerrey was never formally removed from the chair position; talking by phone in early January, he said he believed he still technically held the title, which he called "a lot smaller position than it sounds." When I told him others at FUV had said Thuy was now the chair, he said he supported her holding that position and is still enthusiastic about working on the university in other ways.
"People thought that I shouldn't be chairman," he said. "They made their views clear. They wrote letters. They emailed me. Some of them said some very unkind things. But I'm not going to stop with this project as a consequence of criticism."

In the interest of averting another major public debate and moving the university forward, Thuy says, no public announcement has been made regarding Kerrey's status, though the change was "communicated to all the government branches."

"This is Vietnam, and it's a Vietnamese university, and a controversial matter has been worked out in a satisfactory Vietnamese way," says Ted Osius, FUV's vice president who served as U.S. ambassador to Vietnam until November, and helped facilitate talks between the Vietnamese government and FUV during his tenure.

The fledgling university's administrators are now at work on plans for the hundred-million-dollar campus, hiring faculty and admitting the first undergraduate class of 50 students, who will help build the institution from the ground up during a "co-design year" in 2018-19**.** They hope to not only create a great university in Vietnam – where many top students study outside the country, and everyone agrees higher education is in dire need of improvement – but also an institution that will model innovative educational practices for the rest of the world, eschewing academic departments and emphasizing experiential learning. At some point in 2018, the university will appoint a new chairman of the board of trustees and formally close the Kerrey chapter.

But the impact of the controversy lingers, for FUV and for the U.S.-Vietnam relationship at large. FUV was meant to be a living monument to a new era, free from the stain of a brutal history. Instead, Kerrey's appointment shone a spotlight on that history. The reckoning it spurred in Vietnam – catching American supporters of FUV by surprise—illuminates how the development of a historically improbable friendship has left unsettled some of the most painful issues of the past, and warns that Americans should not forget just how much the Vietnamese have forgiven.

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**Thomas Vallely might be one of the most influential figures** in the U.S.-Vietnam relationship you've never heard of. The friendship between war heroes and onetime Senate colleagues John Kerry and John McCain has long been cited as having helped America start the process of normalizing relations with Vietnam. But behind the scenes, the friendship between Kerry and Vallely, who met anti-war veterans' circles and worked together on Kerry's congressional campaign in 1972, supported some of the education initiatives that built ties between America and Vietnam even before their diplomats could formally talk to each other.

Tall, given to the hearty arm-grabbing of a Boston pol and with a booming voice that reveals his Massachusetts upbringing ("ideas" are "idears"), Vallely describes his style in opposition to that of Thuy, FUV's president: "She's way less combative than I am." He calls FUV his "electric train set" that he's been tinkering with for years.

Vallely served as a marine in central Vietnam in 1969 and was a political consultant and state politician before getting into "the Vietnam business" in 1989. That year, he founded the Harvard Vietnam Program, which sponsors research and educational exchanges. In 1994, Harvard launched the Fulbright Economics Teaching Program, offering graduate training for a small cohort of Vietnamese students modeled on the Harvard Kennedy School. The success of the program, which received State Department funding, helped to pave the way for FUV: FETP, now a graduate school within FUV, has so far trained 1,300 Vietnamese policymakers working in provinces all over the country, according to Vu Thanh Tu Anh, the program's dean, and eight of Vietnam's 18 Politburo members have attended FETP, including Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc.

The relationships the program built within the Vietnamese government over 20 years afforded FETP what Vallely calls "de facto autonomy" to make their own curriculum, admissions and hiring decisions – rare here, where the government tightly controls most universities. "Basically, Fulbright University has a halo over it," Vallely says. "There's two halos. One's called the United States government, and the other is called Harvard. Those halos are helpful."

By 2010, researchers at FETP had issued two white papers about how Vietnam could bolster its higher education system by developing a university that would draw the most talented students from around the country. In 2012, Vallely established the Trust for University Innovation in Vietnam, a U.S.-based 501(c)3, to act as a kind of institution-in-waiting to develop the university before it even had a name. In Obama's second term, with Kerry as secretary of state, a major breakthrough arrived: At Vietnamese President Truong Tan Sang's White House visit in July 2013, he told Obama he welcomed the establishment of FUV.
As the Fulbright team, including Tu Anh of FETP, began negotiations with the Vietnamese government, American backers went to work in Congress to secure funding. In 1997, the United States had demanded that Vietnam pay back some $146 million in war-time debt owed by South Vietnam. In 2014, Kerrey went to Capitol Hill to persuade legislators to give about $20 million remaining from South Vietnam's debt payments to the Trust for University Innovation in Vietnam, whose board Vallely chairs.

Talks in Vietnam plodded on. Tu Anh says the autonomy FUV sought was a hard sell in a country where universities are strictly controlled by the government. Plans to teach Marxist-Leninist thought in philosophy courses alongside other thinkers, and to teach Ho Chi Minh thought in the context of the long and ideologically diverse Vietnamese independence struggle, raised eyebrows. Major breakthroughs, however, came with high-level meetings between the United States and Vietnam, especially as the latter looked to the former as a bulwark against Chinese aggression. Tu Anh notes that the Vietnamese government granted FUV approval in principle only in June 2014, just as thousands of Vietnamese were protesting China's deployment of an oil rig in a contested area of the South China Sea.

A U.S. government official in Vietnam said that while the State Department was heavily involved in negotiations prior to the final licensing of FUV, its role now is to "fade into the background" as the university moves forward as a private institution. American diplomats in Vietnam are optimistic about FUV's future and believe the Vietnamese government wants it to succeed. "This is an initiative where, I think, we've gotten it right," the official said. "Education is a way to bring about that opening of the society, to allow greater expression and autonomy."

In the eyes of the Vietnamese government, Tu Anh and Vallely agree, FUV is still a U.S. government project, even though it is nominally independent and private. While American-style universities abound all over the world, and American institutions like Yale and New York universities have constructed campuses in places like Singapore and Abu Dhabi, FUV stands out for the amount of American government financial and political capital it has received, says Philip Altbach, founding director of Boston College's Center for International Higher Education. Of course, it stands out for its historical significance, too.

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**As FUV began to take shape, Vallely decided** Kerrey should serve as chairman of the board of trustees. He was among the Vietnam veterans in the Senate who had been instrumental in U.S.-Vietnam rapprochement. He had served – contentiously – as president of the New School from 2001 to 2010. He had helped to secure the funding from Congress for FUV, and he was politically well connected. Vallely and Kerrey have been friends since 2001, when Vallely went to New York to help Kerrey manage the fallout from the revelation of his actions in Thanh Phong.

Tu Anh says that Vallely asked whether he thought appointing Kerrey chairman was a good idea. "I said it's not a good idea," Tu Anh recalls. "I said that was sensitive and Vietnamese people may forgive, but they never forget." Vallely says he doesn't remember that conversation and doesn't think it happened. He says he didn't ask any Vietnamese people what they thought of the appointment until he brought it to the board of the trust that oversees FUV, which voted unanimously in favor of Kerrey's appointment in October 2015.

When John Kerry's announcement of Bob Kerrey's position triggered a massive conversation about the war and the place of memory in contemporary relations, the Vietnamese government remained largely quiet. Then, in January 2017, the minister of communications and information, Truong Minh Tuan, spoke out against the former senator's appointment. "There have been several articles in the mainstream media that not only sought to legitimize the appointment, but also conflated the tasks of a soldier with war crimes that violate international laws," he wrote, according to the Vietnamese newspaper *VNExpress*.

Vallely says no one in the Vietnamese government explicitly declared that Kerrey needed to step aside, but that the government's desire for Kerrey to play a smaller role at FUV was clear. With Thuy as chair and president, FUV got its operating license this past June.
Tu Anh, of FETP, says the controversy confirmed the doubts of some in the Vietnamese government who were already wary of FUV. "And then the others say, 'They already corrected their mistake and let's move on,'" Tu Anh says. "Vietnam has had that tradition for a long time.'"

Today, Vallely doesn't think appointing Kerrey was a mistake, and says he was surprised by the backlash. Thanh Phong had entered his mind, he says, but he didn't think it was cause for concern. "I don't think Thanh Phong is a negative," Vallely told me. "I think Thanh Phong is an asset." Vallely regards Kerrey as a hero, who handled the revelation of his actions at Thanh Phong with moral fiber and who can offer experience that no one else can: "I like that Bob understands what human beings can do to each other when they become inhuman."

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**Many people who lost family in the massacre,** and one who survived it herself, are still living in Thanh Phong. The coastal village was home to fewer than 200 people in 1969, and is not much larger today. It lies at the end of a peninsula cradled by two of the Mekong Delta's milk chocolate-brown rivers in the province of Ben Tre, about four hours south of Ho Chi Minh City by car. Narrow roads cut over shrimp farms and rice paddies, and past shops offering cold drinks and hammocks to rest away from the sun.

Since 2001, when the *New York Times Magazine* published its lengthy account of Kerrey's actions in Thanh Phong, the village has been visited by successive waves of international media. When Kerrey was appointed chairman of FUV's board of trustees, another wave crashed on Thanh Phong. Bui Thi Luom, now 61 and retired after years working on a fishing boat, is the only person who survived the shooting back in 1969. At one point in early summer 2016, when the Kerrey uproar was at its height, Vietnamese reporters lined up in front of her house to talk to her. "I was like a pop star or something," she mused, sitting on the porch outside her home when I visited in January.

***A monument to the victims of the 1969 massacre stands in the village of Thanh Phong. | Isabelle Taft/Politico Magazine***

The story Luom and other witnesses have told over the years is this. On the night of February 25, 1969, Kerrey and his six men killed an elderly couple and their three grandchildren in the first home they encountered, using knives to keep quiet. Luom and 15 of her family members were sleeping nearby in a zigzag dugout with an opening at either end, a kind of structure commonly used in the area to protect from air fire. The Americans woke them and told them to come outside. After a few moments, the soldiers began firing at close range. Luom, then 12, was hit in the knee but was able to escape back into the trench and to safety. Everyone else was killed. Her account accords with the

one given to the *Times* by Gerhard Klann, a member of Kerrey's team, but differs from Kerrey's own account, in which the firing began on his orders only after the team believed they had received fire from Viet Cong forces.

Pham Thi Lanh, 79, recently recalled the night while sitting in front of her television, placed underneath framed portraits of Ho Chi Minh and General Vo Nguyen Giap. She could hear the massacre from her home, she told me. When the Americans left and she went to see what happened, she found some of the bodies lying as if they had been begging just before they died. One woman, she remembers, had beautiful hair, so long it passed her hips.
To Luom, Fulbright University Vietnam means nothing other than a reason more reporters came to her house to ask the same questions they had already asked. She expected that after people told her story all over the world, she and others who had lost relatives in the massacre would receive some practical benefits, perhaps money to pay for the doctor's visits she still requires for the knee wound she suffered during the killings. But nothing happened, except that the Vietnamese government built a monument to the victims at the site of the massacre. Today, the gray pillar inscribed with the story of the massacre is weather-beaten, the letters difficult to read, a purple blossom sprouting up through the crack between the base of the monument and concrete surrounding it, a few incense sticks slowly disintegrating in an urn in front.

***Pham Thi Lanh, 79, and her sister-in-law Nguyen Thi Xuan, 80 in Thanh Phong, Vietnam. | Banh He/Politico Magazine***

Luom says she is tired of talking about the massacre, and the next time a journalist comes to town she won't. She no longer thinks about revenge, but she still thinks someone – Kerrey or the American government – should do something to make amends for Thanh Phong's suffering. She does not believe it will ever happen.
Kerrey, too, is tired of talking about what happened in Thanh Phong. "I've spoken enough about that," he said when we talked in January.

Thanh Phong's tragedy is not unique for a war in which at least 2 million civilians were killed, except in that the world learned of its horrors, and that it involved a high-profile American public figure. To Vallely, the sheer ubiquity of violence against civilians in Vietnam, but especially in the densely populated Mekong Delta, argues against singling out Kerrey for criticism. Journalist Nick Turse's book *Kill Anything that Moves* describes another campaign during which an "unrestrained war on the delta's villages" killed about 5,000 civilians in just six months, over a period coinciding with Kerrey's operation in Thanh Phong. None of the victims has ever received reparations or an apology from the United States.

Kerrey says he was neither surprised nor offended by the public reaction to his FUV appointment. In accepting the position, he faced a "binary choice" and picked the option he thought likeliest to improve quality of life for Vietnamese and Americans. "Should I just go to the VFW and drink beer and complain about how horrible our politicians were in the 1960s?" he asks. "To me, the question is, do you really want to live in the past or do you want to live in the present, trying to build a better future?"

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**What might that better future look like?** Inside a light-filled co-working space in a high-rise in Ho Chi Minh City's District 2, a group of students and FUV administrators listened to a lecture from a prospective faculty member in January. At the end of the lecture, the students, who had signed up to attend the event, evaluated the class. Their feedback will be used to help make hiring decisions, in a process exhibiting the collaborative spirit that FUV administrators say will guide the university. Huan Pham, a first-year university student who plans to apply for the "co-design year," said he is interested in the flexibility of study at FUV and the chance to experience an "American-quality education." America, he said "is like a big brother helping Vietnam."

At the event, the aspiring FUV students weren't much concerned with what Kerrey had done in Thanh Phong. "I think it doesn't matter," said one, 18-year-old Le Ngoc Van An. "In the war between America and Vietnam, there were a lot of mistakes. But we can change the mistakes. We are people. We are human. We can give people another chance."

The U.S. official in Vietnam said that FUV had “moved a little further down the river” from the Kerrey controversy. “The U.S. government can look at this and be very proud that the money that was put in to seed this program is bearing fruit,” the official said. “You see hundreds and hundreds of Vietnamese students applying to the undergrad program and hear about parents and kids calling and saying, ‘When can we start?’”

Yet the reality of Thanh Phong exists alongside the reality of FUV’s liberal arts curriculum. Will FUV acknowledge that concretely, officially? Novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen, perhaps FUV’s most vocal critic in the United States, argued in the *New York Times* in 2016 that the university should support local schools in Thanh Phong and offer full scholarships to students from the village. Thuy, FUV’s president, said she doesn’t think students want to be “treated as victims” and rewarded for a suffering they do not claim. Nguyen also called on Kerrey to visit Thanh Phong and offer an apology to relatives and survivors there. Kerrey says he would “very much would like to” return to Thanh Phong at some point, though he doesn’t know when he will be back in Vietnam next.

Vallely, who visited Thanh Phong for the first time last year, doesn’t think Kerrey should go. FUV is “a bigger contribution and a more important contribution to Vietnam” than visiting a small community that suffered like so many others during the war, he believes. The new university and the small delta village are worlds apart. “There’s no one in Thanh Phong going to FUV,” he says.