

So They Gave Him a Tin Hat, and They Gave Him a Gun

Bob Kerrey's Bogus Journey

by Vince Carducci

When I Was a Young Man

by Bob Kerrey

(New York: Harcourt, 2002)

270 pp.; \$26.00 hardcover.

Midway through his memoir, *When I Was a Young Man*, former Nebraska governor and senator Bob Kerrey writes, "When I graduated from college in the spring of 1965, I was very much the sleepwalker." After stumbling into the living nightmare of Vietnam a few years later, Kerrey, like the rest of America, would be rudely awakened.

And like America after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Kerrey then seems to have hit the snooze button. Though the narrative ends in 1970 with the beginnings of Kerrey's recovery from the physical and spiritual wounds of war, there is a kind of denial in this book that its author, and by extension the powers that be, has yet to face. A survivor, Kerrey subsequently succeeded in business, then politics; he is now making his mark on academia as president of New School University. Similarly, America has slipped back into place as top carnivore in the glob-

al political food chain.

Kerrey writes in a voice as spare and even as the prairie where the first half of his story unfolds. The syntax is Middle American vernacular, and the childhood it describes a metaphor for the Eisenhower Era. Kerrey's youth on the outskirts of Lincoln, Nebraska, in the 1950s and early 1960s was pure "white bread": high school varsity football, the college frat, work as a small-town pharmacist, and a few minor scrapes with authority along the way. Like most Americans in the isolationism after the Korean War, Kerrey's connection to the outside world was the flickering of images across the screen of the nightly TV news.

His decision to join the Navy in October 1966, in anticipation of the draft, ostensibly changed that. Chosen to lead a team of