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"And babies.": The History, Politics, and Memory of My Lai, 1968-2018

Dana Lechleiter

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Dana Lechleiter

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Capstone Project Advisor: _____
Osamah Khalil, Associate Professor

Capstone Project Reader: _____
Mark Schmeller, Associate Professor

Honors Director: _____
Chris Johnson, Interim Director

Abstract

On March 16, 1968, American soldiers murdered over 500 elderly men, women, and children in the small Vietnamese village of My Lai. Although the U.S. military attempted to conceal the massacre, it was eventually revealed by investigative journalist Seymour Hersh. Utilizing a wide range of primary and secondary sources, my thesis examines official and popular reactions to the My Lai massacre and its role in the historical memory of the Vietnam War. I detail the investigation and trial of the soldiers responsible, the conviction of one of the massacre's chief perpetrators, and the intervention of President Richard Nixon. The passing of the fiftieth anniversary of the massacre has inspired a wave of new works. My thesis analyzes how sentiments have changed over the past fifty years, how My Lai is viewed today, and why it is important that this massacre is remembered.

Executive Summary

On March 16, 1968, 500 elderly men, women, and children were murdered by American soldiers in the small Vietnamese village of My Lai. In the ensuing five decades, the My Lai Massacre has largely become a footnote in the history of the Vietnam War and American foreign policy. My thesis explores how the massacre was perpetrated and covered-up by the US military and government officials. Drawing on a range of primary and secondary sources, I trace a gradual, yet clear shift in opinion from defending the men of Charlie Company to honoring those who intervened in the atrocity to save Vietnamese lives.

I examine the reaction of those in the United States from Richard Nixon's White House to the courthouse in Fort Benning, Georgia. My thesis explores the impact of the My Lai Massacre on popular culture and eventually the memories of Americans and Vietnamese. I demonstrate that, despite irrefutable evidence that Charlie Company committed this atrocity, they received avid support from the Americans public, as well as ranking members of both the government and military. I contend that this was due to notions of American exceptionalism, in particular the idea that the United States is *the* "moral" superpower of the world. This vision of America held by its citizens led many to focus the narrative on those soldiers who attempted to save Vietnamese lives, rather than murder them systematically. In the final chapter, I explore how the Vietnam War influenced aspects of American popular culture culminating in the fiftieth anniversary of the My Lai massacre. Although there has been research done on My Lai and historical memory, this recent milestone has led to a plethora of new works, including books, articles, and documentaries, being released in memory of those who died in 1968, as well as those who carried out the killings. I analyze how the anniversary has influenced American perceptions of the Vietnam War and the massacre after a half century.

Since the fall of Saigon, the United States has continued to send troops to aid in conflicts around the globe that neither their soldiers nor the American public understand. For many Americans, the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that began in the early twenty-first century bore many similarities to the War in Vietnam. Unfortunately, this included the mistreatment of combatants and noncombatants in the war zone. My capstone is an important reminder that the My Lai Massacre was not merely an aberration, but a systemic issue present in the modern military system.

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Chapter 1

When The New Yorker *magazine correspondent Jonathon Schell was touring Quang Ngai Province in the late summer of 1967—as he wrote later—a GI who was driving him around in a jeep suddenly turned and said, "You wouldn't believe the things that go on in this war."*

"What things?" Schell asked.

"You wouldn't believe it."

"What kinds of things then?"

"You wouldn't believe it, so I'm not going to tell you," The GI said, shaking his head no. "No one's ever going to find out about some things, and after this war is over, and we've all gone home, no one is ever going to know."

— Seymour M. Hersh[1]

Exactly what did, in fact, occur in the village of "Pinkville" in March, 1968 I do not know for certain, but I am convinced that it was something very black indeed.

— Ron Ridenhour[2]

Introduction

On March 16, 1968, a company[3] of American soldiers entered a Vietnamese village in Quang Ngai Province and proceeded to kill over 500 elderly men, women, and children. Son My,

[1] Seymour M. Hersh, *My Lai 4: A Report on the Massacre and Its Aftermath (*New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1970), 14-15.
[2] Ron Ridenhour, "Ron Ridenhour Letter," Famous Trials, Accessed February 15, 2018, http://famous-trials.com/mylaicourts/1649-ridenhour-ltr.
[3] During the Vietnam War, a military company could range from 60-200 men and was usually commanded by a captain, a first lieutenant, or a major. Charlie Company was made up of about 100 men at the time of My Lai.

referred to as My Lai (4)[4] in official military documentation and deemed "Pinkville"[5] by U.S. troops, was burnt to the ground and its livestock slaughtered. Women and girls were raped and then brutally killed. There were few survivors. Throughout the Vietnam War, there were a number of scandals involving U.S. troops and the mistreatment and killing of civilians within the war zone. However, none of them, that we know of, involved carnage of this magnitude at the hands of an infantry force.

Charlie Company was not comprised of evil men determined to murder and pillage; they were sons, brothers, and fathers, sent to the other side of the world unprepared and unsure of what they were fighting for. Their commanding officers who were tasked with informing them on the proper way to treat prisoners and civilians barely did so. Before their deployment to Vietnam, soldiers had a one-hour informational session and it was never mentioned again. After the massacre, these same commanding officers held questionable investigations into the killings and ultimately buried the deaths by filing false reports. Through a series of cover-ups rising all the way to the White House, the My Lai Massacre was kept from the American public for over a year. This silence broke when Private Ron Ridenhour reported rumors he had heard regarding hundreds of civilians being killed in a village called "Pinkville." After tracking down various members of Charlie Company and corroborating their stories, Ridenhour sent a letter detailing what he had discovered to his congressman in Washington D.C., as well as a variety of other officials within the federal government and the Pentagon.

[4] My Lai (4) was the army-designated name for Son My that was used in military-issued maps and official correspondence. It was named by the administrative district followed by a number designated which hamlet within the district it symbolized.
[5] "Pinkville" was an unofficial name for the area used by Americans stationed in Quang Ngai province. It referred to the color designation of the region on military maps, which signified a dense population.

Taking place during one of the most polarized times in American history, the trials of those charged in the massacre caused an uproar among average citizens, both in anger and in empathy. Most Americans could not believe that U.S. soldiers, sworn to protect the lives of the innocent, would kill civilians for sport. Others that heard the story felt that the soldiers involved in the massacre should be celebrated, not imprisoned. Following the trial and sentencing of Lt. William Calley for his actions at My Lai, Hildegard Crochet of New Orleans defended the man convicted of murdering twenty-two Vietnamese civilians, screaming outside the courthouse, "He's been crucified!... Lieutenant Calley killed one hundred communists singlehanded. He should get a medal. He should be promoted to general."[6] In the end, Calley served three years of his life sentence under house arrest before being paroled with the help of President Richard M. Nixon.

Over the past fifty years, stories of cruelty and murder during the Vietnam War have continued to surface, especially after the declassification of the files of the Vietnam War Crimes Working Group in the early 2000s. As established by the Hague and Geneva Conventions, there is a finite difference between the inescapable civilian casualties that result from combat and the direct targeting of noncombatants in a war zone. During the Vietnam War, the U.S. military adopted a different strategy than had been traditionally utilized: they executed a war of attrition against the National Liberation Front guerrillas (derisively referred to as "Viet Cong" or Vietnamese Communists). Instead of measuring victory by the amount of land captured, the success of a company was quantified by the number of enemy combatants killed in action. Between 1955 and 1975, "an estimated two million Vietnamese civilians were killed, another 5.3

[6] Howard Jones, *My Lai: 1968, and the Descent into Darkness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 289.

million injured and about 11 million, by US government figures, became refugees in their own country."[7] Unlike previous conflicts like World War II, there was no uniform for the enemy in Southeast Asia, except the black pajamas that the guerrillas sometimes wore to camouflage themselves at night in the jungle. In a war where the enemy and the innocent began to meld together, it was only a matter of time before something horrible happened.

In my thesis, I draw on a range of primary and secondary sources to examine the sequence of events that took place on that March morning in 1968 as well as the aftermath, ultimately concluding with Lt. Calley's release from house arrest in 1974. I analyze how the American public reacted in the years following My Lai and trace a gradual, yet clear shift in opinion from supporting the perpetrators of the killings to an emphasis on honoring those who attempted to intervene. This, my thesis will argue, is due to American exceptionalism and the country's need to be "the good guys" of global politics. In a 2009 speech, President Barack Obama accredited this mindset to "a core set of values that are enshrined in [America's] Constitution, in [its] body of law, in [its] democratic practices, in [its] belief in free speech and equality, that, though imperfect, are exceptional."[8] Therefore, when it was no longer possible for Americans to deny the massacre, the narrative was refocused on the Americans who intervened and helped save some Vietnamese lives, rather than on the actual crimes and the perpetrators. Nor did it lead to a broader discussion of how America became involved in Vietnam, the way the war was prosecuted, or why. As time passed, My Lai became a footnote in what was once "America's Longest War" – a war many Americans wanted to forget if they could. My thesis

[7] Nick Turse, "Was My Lai Just One of Many Massacres in Vietnam War?" *BBC News*, August 28, 2013, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-23427726.
[8] Karen Tumulty, "American Exceptionalism, Explained," The Washington Post, September 12, 2013, accessed April 23, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2013/09/12/american-exceptionalism-explained/?utm_term=.94ad01bd0c42.

concludes by examining how the massacre is viewed five decades later. I contend that the tragedy and the presence of the My Lai Massacre in the memories of the Vietnam War has influenced discussions of military scandals during the Global War on Terror.

Literature Review

Over the last fifty years, there has been a significant amount of research done on the My Lai Massacre. It has been dissected and recounted numerous times by journalists, authors, and historians. There has been a number of studies that examine how My Lai is remembered in the aftermath of the killings and the context of the massacre within the Vietnam War. As the United States reflects on the fiftieth anniversary of My Lai, as well as the war, there has been a plethora of new articles, opinion-editorials, and other content being released to pay homage to this turbulent time in U.S. history. However, there has yet to be an analysis of this response to the anniversary and its role in shaping the historical memory of the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War as well as its role in the My Lai Massacre.

The killings at Son My in 1968 are well-documented and have been the subject of numerous books since the 1970s. One of the first works fully dedicated to the massacre was Seymour Hersh's *My Lai 4: A Report on the Massacre and Its Aftermath* and its sequel *Cover-Up: The Army's Secret Investigation of the Massacre at My Lai 4*[9], both of which utilize first hand interviews and research that gave an in-depth view of the events of March 16 and the subsequent Peers Inquiry orchestrated by the U.S. military. After serving as Senator Eugene McCarthy's press secretary during his 1968 presidential campaign, Hersh worked as a freelance

[9] Hersh, *My Lai 4*. Seymour M. Hersh, *Cover-Up* (New York: Random House, 1972).

journalist covering the Vietnam War. It was during this time that he received a tip that led him to uncover the My Lai Massacre. His subsequent articles would ultimately earn him a Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting.[10] Though he presents a thorough account of the My Lai Massacre and the aftermath, a great deal of information has been discovered following the declassification of various documents in the last fifty years. Hersh, therefore, was not capable of fully assessing President Nixon's role in Lt. Calley's trial and various other aspects of the aftershock of My Lai.[11]

As the years progressed, many of the books published about My Lai followed a very similar format; most chronicled the exact timeline of the entire My Lai incident, usually with some specificities not included in earlier works, and then concluded with a brief account of how America as a nation was coping with these types of atrocities in its past. This approach was followed by *Four Hours in My Lai* by Michael Bilton and Kevin Sims in 1992; *The Vietnam War on Trial: The My Lai Massacre and the Court Martial of Lieutenant Calley* by Michal R. Belknap in 2002; *My Lai: An American Atrocity in the Vietnam War* by William Thomas Allison in 2012; and *My Lai: Vietnam, 1968, and the Descent into Darkness* by Howard Jones in 2017.[12] Jones' account is the most complete and includes President Nixon's covert intervention in the

[10] Oliver Burkeman, "Profile: Seymour Hersh," The Guardian, October 09, 2004, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/oct/09/pulitzerprize.awardsandprizes.

[11] Hersh finally visited My Lai in 2015. He chronicled the visit and the interviews he conducted with both American soldiers and Vietnamese in "The Scene of the Crime," which was published in *The New Yorker.* The article reflects on the importance of My Lai and the atrocities that were committed in Vietnam at the hands of American soldiers. Hersh has also participated in many interviews about My Lai and its connection to America's modern wars.

[12] Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai* (London, UK: Penguin, 1992). Michael R. Belknap, *The Vietnam War on Trial: The My Lai Massacre and the Court-Martial of Lieutenant Calle*y (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002). William Thomas Allison, *My Lai: An American Atrocity in the Vietnam War* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012). Jones, *My Lai.*

various hearings following the exposure of My Lai. In his epilogue, Jones tries to dissect the ever-present question: how and why did the massacre happen? He focuses a great deal on how My Lai impacted military procedure and the lives of soldiers, but not how My Lai affected society and the historical memory left in its wake.

Others took greater strides to understand the presence of My Lai and Vietnam within the contemporary American psyche. In *Facing My Lai: Moving Beyond the Massacre*[13], David L. Anderson compiled a collection of various presentations given at a conference entitled "My Lai Twenty-Five Years After: Facing the Darkness and Healing the Wounds." This book addresses several topics related to My Lai, including the psychological effects that witnessing atrocities had on U.S. soldiers and the role of the press in Vietnam. The authors of these various essays set out not to condemn those who took part in the killings, but understand how ordinary Americans could take part in such horrific actions. The one glaring aspect missing from these accounts is the Vietnamese perspective of My Lai. In a book attempting to heal the wounds of the massacre, the aftermath of its victims' suffering was barely mentioned.

In Kendrick Oliver's *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory,*[14] published in 2006, the author analyzes how the My Lai Massacre is remembered in American society. Oliver's book was released following the scandal at Abu Ghraib prison in the wake of the many parallels being drawn between the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and Vietnam. Though Oliver raised a great deal of issues that needed to be brought forward for public discussion, the analysis was, of course, limited to the author's time of publication. Since the work was

[13] David L. Anderson, *Facing My Lai: Moving Beyond the Massacre* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998).
[14] Kendrick Oliver, *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory* (Manchester, UK: Manchester Univ. Press, 2006).

published, the United States has intervened in other countries, including Libya and Syria, and continues to face a growing threat from North Korea. This thesis examines how the memory of My Lai continues to resonate in the United States, particularly as the fiftieth anniversary is observed.

In order to fully understand the presence of the My Lai Massacre in contemporary historical memory, one must also take into account the legacy of the Vietnam War itself within American society. In works such as *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* by George C. Herring and *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History* by Mark Atwood Lawrence,[15] historians not only discuss the major events of the war, but also the aftermath of Vietnam and its long-term effects for the United States. As the My Lai Massacre played a critical role in shaping American opinion of the Vietnam War, it is important to understand the broader context of the conflict and the policies that contributed to the massacre. Neither of these works, however, provide an in-depth understanding of what My Lai was or the impact it had on antiwar sentiment in the United States. Instead, it is presented as one aspect of a much larger issue of misconduct amongst American soldiers in the war. Both Lawrence and Herring provide only half of a page to discuss the massacre, which could suggest to readers that the event was not that important to the conflict but still had to be addressed in an account of Vietnam.

Many works have also investigated how Americans remember and commemorate the Vietnam War. In Robert J. McMahon's article "Contested Memory: The Vietnam War and

[15] George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 5th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2014). Mark Atwood Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010).

American Society, 1975-2001,"[16] he argues that most Americans, including U.S. leaders, have predominantly attempted to forget about the war and the shame that resulted from it. Since the end of the war, the United States has refused to acknowledge American responsibility for the deaths of exorbitant numbers of Vietnamese and the destruction of thousands of acres of land. McMahon warns that if Americans do not face the reality of Vietnam, they will be unable to "discern larger patterns of meaning in the external projection of American power and influence."[17] In *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam*,[18] Jerry Lembcke questions the validity of the charge that antiwar protesters spat on Vietnam veterans returning home from war. This criticism of those who spoke out against Vietnam, Lembcke argues, was created by the Nixon administration and used by many politicians since in order to create a divide between those serving on the front lines and those opposed to sending them there. After the war was over, this same fictive mistreatment of soldiers was combined with the account of the mental unfitness of Vietnam veterans to focus the narrative from the war to the failure of those who served to defeat the enemy. Walter L. Hixson's *The United States and the Vietnam War: Historical Memory and Representation of the Vietnam War*[19] examines the cultural impact of the war on American society. A collection of various scholarly articles, Hixson compiled works that explore the effect of the famous Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington D.C. and how the war itself is portrayed through film and other artistic venues. Though each of

[16] Robert McMahon, "Contested Memory: The Vietnam War and American Society, 1975–2001," *Diplomatic History* 26, no. 2 (April 1, 2002): accessed April 24, 2018, doi:https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7709.00306.
[17] Ibid., 184.
[18] Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).
[19] Walter L. Hixson, ed., *Historical Memory and Representations of the Vietnam War*, vol. 6, 6 vols., The United States and the Vietnam War (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000).

these works covers various facets of remembering Vietnam, they each question how accurately and effectively these various methods of remembrance are to the actual events of Vietnam.

After the files related to the Vietnam War Crimes Working Group were declassified, authors like Nick Turse took full advantage of the newly released resource. In his 2013 book, *Kill Anything That Moves,*[20] Turse determines that My Lai was not merely an aberration, as described by Nixon, but rather one of many atrocities that resulted in the deaths of thousands of non-combatants. He also asserts that many American atrocities were strategically covered up by military command during Vietnam and are largely forgotten within today's society. Turse's argument that Americans have forgotten Vietnam, though in some ways true, is refuted by the increase in conversation surrounding the fiftieth anniversary, as this thesis will argue. There are many issues that need to be deliberated at length, and there is a greater possibility of that happening if the United States can become comfortable with such discussions, even if it has not yet reached that point.

The My Lai scandal lasted from November 1969, when Seymour Hersh published his series of articles on the killings, to May of 1974, when Calley was released from house arrest on parole. Following the declassification of memos written by President Nixon and his key advisors in the months after the disclosure of the massacre, a great deal of research has been done on Nixon's role in its aftermath. Even though the actual event did not take place under his administration, Nixon actively attempted to discredit witnesses and interject in court proceedings involving those charged in the killings. Along with Jones' account of Nixon's attempt to hush the

[20] Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and, 2013).

military proceedings against Lt. Calley, Rick Perlstein's *Nixonland*[21] delves into the perceived political gains that motivated Richard Nixon, one of the most polarizing figures in American history, to side with the young officer. Both works, however, fail to address how the intervention of President Nixon normalized American apathy towards the abject suffering of the Vietnamese.

Many presidential biographies gloss over the My Lai Massacre as just another concern in the overarching quagmire of Nixon's Vietnam. In Stephen Ambrose's *Nixon Vol. 2: 1962-1972,*[22] the killings and the trial of William Calley each receive two pages respectively, with very little depth nor empathy. In 1989, much of the memos and correspondence of Richard Nixon were yet to be released, leaving Ambrose with substantially less information on Nixon's role in attempts to bury the war crime than modern historians and biographers would have. John A. Farrell's *Richard Nixon: The Life,*[23] written in 2017, surprisingly goes into even less detail than Ambrose, though the author does mention Nixon's "dirty tricks" and attempts to obstruct various investigations into My Lai. The lack of depth in Nixon biographies regarding the atrocity could indicate that many do not feel that the massacre had a huge impact on the Nixon presidency. This, however, seems improbable as the massacre and subsequent trials were front page news from 1969 until 1974.

The Vietnam War cannot be fully understood unless the perspective of the Vietnamese who survived it is also taken into account. In his book *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War,*[24] Viet Thanh Nguyen explores the memory of the war in both Vietnam and the

[21] Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008).
[22] Stephen E. Ambrose, *Nixon: 1962-1972*, vol. 2, 3 vols. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989).
[23] John Farrell, *Richard Nixon: The Life* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2018).
[24] Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

United States in a way that few others have. Nguyen argues that a war is "fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory."[25] In order for both Vietnam and the United States to move forward and fully recover from their past, Nguyen reasons, they must replace their fear of the past with acceptance of what has come to pass. Horrible things happened during the Vietnam War and they must be acknowledged and forgiven. Though Nguyen's analysis of Vietnam and memory is comprehensive, there is only brief mentions of My Lai at various points of the book.

Heonik Kwon's *After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai*, on the other hand, focuses heavily on the massacres of My Lai, as well as an additional mass murder that occurred during the Tet Offensive in Ha My, a small village south of Da Nang. The book's "main focus is on what people do now with the physical and spiritual remains of the tragic incidents" and how the Vietnamese were shaped by the murder of civilians that took place much too frequently.[26] As My Lai played a major role in the American narrative of the war, my thesis will incorporate the Vietnamese perspective on My Lai and its place in the conflict.

While the existing literature accurately and thoroughly provides a complete overview of the events of My Lai and those who took part in them, there has yet to be an analysis of how the fiftieth anniversary of the massacre has been looked at by the few Americans that still remember the atrocity. In my thesis, I will provide an analysis of how sentiment within the United States has changed over the last fifty years, especially towards those involved. The evolution of who was thought of as a perpetrator, a victim, or a hero shows a fundamental disconnect between the

[25] Ibid., 4.
[26] Heonik Kwon, *After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 3-4.

various factions found within the U.S. government and the American public both during and after the Vietnam War. Despite the abundant research done on the atrocity, My Lai is widely forgotten within popular culture. My thesis will explain why it is essential that Americans not forget.

1968

Tet Nguyen Dan, known colloquially as Tet, is the most important holiday in Vietnam. Occurring on the Lunar New Year, the Vietnamese believe that Tet sets the tone for the year to come. Lasting anywhere from one day to a week, celebrations are centered around family gatherings at which people hope for prosperity and happiness.[27] During the early years of the Vietnam War, Tet was honored as a ceasefire so that the Vietnamese could celebrate with those they loved and rest from the vicious fighting of the war. In 1968, this ended entirely.

Just after the Tet festivities began in the early morning of January 30, "eighty-four thousand troops launched surprise attacks against hundreds of cities and villages from the seventeenth parallel to the Mekong Delta."[28] The massive assault came after a purge within the Northern Communist government in an effort to rid the party of moderates in favor of negotiating with the United States. According to George C. Herring, Le Duan, General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam, "opposed serious negotiations prior to a military victory. To lure U.S. troops away from the major population centers and maintain high enemy casualties, a series of diversionary attacks would be launched in remote

[27] Heather Potter, "Tet Festival in Vietnam," *USA Today*, http://traveltips.usatoday.com/tet-festival-vietnam-23114.html.
[28] Lawrence, *The Vietnam War*, 115.

areas."[29] This would then be followed by a massive urban attack in Saigon and other major Southern cities, which would result in a vast uprising of the Vietnamese people. Though the Tet Offensive would be declared an American victory, the battle would serve as a call for negotiations both at home and amongst U.S. soldiers.

In the months leading up to the offensive, Northern operatives and members of the National Liberation Front, more commonly known as the NLF or the Viet Cong, began preparing for the upcoming attack. Many "disguised [themselves] as ordinary peasants or even as South Vietnams soldiers, [and] moved into the cities and stockpiled weapons, while political operatives plotted assassinations of South Vietnamese officials and readied themselves to lead a popular uprising."[30] Hanoi's goal for the Tet Offensive was to inspire rebellion among the South Vietnamese population and force the United States to scale back its involvement in the Vietnam War. When the offensive first began, it appeared to many that the Le Duan might accomplish his longtime objective of overtaking South Vietnam. On the first night of Tet, the joint force of NLF and Northern soldiers succeeded in infiltrating five major capitals, thirty-six provincial capitals, and sixty-four district capitals, all of which were a surprise to members of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) on patrol at the time. In the Southern capital of Saigon, "nineteen NLF soldiers blew a hole in the wall surrounding the U.S embassy at 2:45 a.m. and waged a six-hour firefight with marine guards before being killed or wounded."[31] Though the U.S. and the ARVN were able to take back a majority of the ground seized during the surprise attack, the Tet

[29] Herring, *America's Longest War*, 235.
[30] Lawrence, *The Vietnam War,* 121-122.
[31] Ibid., 121.

Offensive made many Americans, even those who supported the war, question just how close the United States was to victory in Vietnam.

Tet was just the beginning of the most violent year of the Vietnam War. The deadliest week of the war for the United States occurred during the Tet Offensive from February 11–17, 1968, when five hundred forty-three Americans were killed in action, and two thousand five hundred and forty-seven were wounded.[32] Throughout 1968, "more than 14,500 U.S. soldiers were killed and 46,000 wounded, while the communists lost at least 200,000 killed and an unknown number of wounded."[33] Although Tet had been a major military victory for the United States, public opinion in favor of the war took a hard blow in the weeks following the attack. Americans did not understand why President Lyndon B. Johnson was continuing to tell them that the war was coming to an end and that the U.S. was winning, when North Vietnam was capable of surprising the world's foremost military power in the heart of Saigon.[34] For one of the first times, Americans believed that the President of the United States was lying to them: the end was nowhere in sight.

While anti-war sentiment was growing at home, General William Westmoreland, the commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam from 1964 to 1968, and General Earle Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs asked President Johnson for an additional 206,000 troops to be called up out of the reserves. Wheeler believed that the additional troops would allow the U.S. to counter enemy attacks in the South and force the Northern Vietnamese Army to retreat. He also thought it would allow U.S. and ARVN forces to restore security in NLF controlled zones in the country

[32] "U.S. war toll sets record," *Toledo Blade*, February 22, 1968, 1.
[33] Lawrence, *The Vietnam War*, 133.
[34] Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999), 504.

and urban areas. Wheeler argued that this would reinforce morale amongst soldiers through tactical victories.[35] As one of his final acts as Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara challenged Wheeler's claims that escalation would be the definitive blow that would turn the tides of the Vietnam War. McNamara reasoned that every time the U.S. had increased their numbers, so had North Vietnam; why would this time be different? This type of clash between army and civilian leaders had become increasingly common in Washington, as no one could agree on who was in fact winning the war in Vietnam. Military leaders continuously claimed major tactical victories, like Tet, while congressional leaders did not see or could not quantify those types of victories and explain them to their constituents. American family members did not care that 43,000 Vietnamese were killed during Tet, they only cared that almost 3,000 Americans were either killed or injured.

As the 1968 presidential election loomed and anti-war sentiment continued to grow, Democratic candidates, including Senators Eugene McCarthy and Robert F. Kennedy, began advocating for negotiations and peace settlements. In late 1967, McCarthy announced his run for the presidency on what essentially would be a one-issue campaign: the immediate withdrawal of troops from Vietnam. Following the Tet Offensive in early 1968, McCarthy "shocked the country by winning 42 percent of the primary vote in New Hampshire" on March 12.[36] Four days later, Robert Kennedy announced his bid for the presidency, running on an antiwar platform. Unlike McCarthy, Kennedy supported the strengthening of ARVN troops and gradual withdrawal from Vietnam. After two weeks of deliberation among top officials, Johnson announced on March 31 that he would not seek reelection, but rather put all of his energy into

[35] Ibid., 504.
[36] Ibid., 527.

attempting to bring peace in Vietnam.[37] Incumbent Vice President Hubert Humphrey entered the race three weeks later, relying heavily on closed door political maneuvers to secure electoral votes at the convention in 1968. In the wake of Kennedy's assassination on June 10, South Dakota Senator George McGovern entered the race on August 10, running in the late senator's place.

While the Democrats battled on the political stage, the antiwar movement gained continuous momentum in the public eye. Since the mid 1960s, antiwar protests at universities around the country drew increasing national attention as college students rebelled against the establishment. In 1965, "the Vietnam Day Committee, Berkeley, was created out of Vietnam Day, the 35-hour anti-Vietnam war teach-in which brought 35,000 people to the University of California campus on May 21 and 22."[38] Following Tet, these protests grew in both size and frequency. At Columbia University, a protest led by the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) besieged the campus grounds and held them for over twenty-four hours. Many students rallied in support of Senator Eugene McCarthy. The Tet Offensive brought about a surge in antiwar sentiment that was compounded by the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy. The turmoil finally came to its peak at the Democratic National Convention in 1968 when, "while party delegates clashed over the war inside the convention hall, protesters and police waged harrowing street battles that received wide media coverage. In all, the rioting resulted in 668 arrests, one death, and hundreds of injuries."[39] Following the riots, the city of Chicago indicted a group of seven men for crimes related to the violence that occurred at the

[37] Ibid., 529.
[38] "Vietnam Day Committee," Online Archive of California, accessed April 23, 2018, http://www.oac.cdlib.org/view?docId=kt3h4n99mj&brand=oac4&doc.view=entire_text.
[39] Lawerence, *The Vietnam War*, 135.

convention, becoming known as the Chicago 7. Amongst these men was Tom Hayden, one of the founding members of SDS.[40]

Despite the massive protests occurring outside the convention, Hubert Humphrey swept the Democratic nomination and ran with Edmund Muskie, a little-known Senator from Maine. This outcome, however, was a hard fought battled that took place behind the scenes of the Democratic National Convention. In the weeks leading up to the convention, President Johnson began reconsidering his decision not to seek reelection, especially after the assassination of Robert Kennedy. Behind closed doors, numerous top Democrats assured the president that, should he choose to appear in Chicago, he would have support from the floor and could secure the nomination of the party. Though publicly supporting Humphrey, President Johnson did not trust his former Vice President, viewing him as weak and disloyal. As the president's polls sank and peace negotiations froze, Johnson finally decided against running for another term, but made sure that the platform plank on Vietnam supported his actions in Southeast Asia. The entire party as well as the American people knew that the convention was almost entirely orchestrated by Johnson, which cast the appearance of weakness and inability to unite the party on the Democratic candidate for President of the United States.[41]

In one final effort to bring the war to a respectable end, Johnson threw the full weight of the presidency behind 1968 peace talks between the North and South in Paris. Returning to presidential campaigning for the first time since his loss to John F. Kennedy in 1960, former Vice President Richard Nixon ran on the idea that he (and only he) could get America out of

[40] "The Chicago 7," PBS, accessed April 23, 2018, http://www.pbs.org/opb/thesixties/topics/war/newsmakers_2.html.
[41] Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 570-575.

Vietnam. “Those who have had a chance for another four years and could not produce peace,” Nixon said, “should not be given another chance.”[42] Nixon worried that the negotiations could result in peace in Southeast Asia. If Johnson were to succeed, the Democrats would hold on to the presidency for another four years and Nixon’s chance at the presidency would disappear. Luckily for Nixon, the chances of peace rising from the Paris talks seemed slim due to the seemingly constant increase in demands from South Vietnam. According to Richard Pearlstein, “the reason was that Nixon has sabotaged the negotiations.”[43] Nixon sent Anna Chennault, a prominent Republican politician, to convince President Thieu to agree to nothing and wait until Nixon was elected, promising them a better deal under a Republican president. Not surprisingly, it took little to convince Thieu. Once the South agreed to these terms, there was virtually no hope for peace before the election and the war was ensured to continue, lasting another seven years.

As 1968 came to a close, the United States was left more polarized than any time since the Civil War. The nation was deeply divided by Vietnam and no one seemed to have the answer as to what to do next. Amidst the confusion and disillusionment laid a dark secret that the Army did not want anyone to know about, for if Americans did find out they feared an all-out rebellion against the war effort.

On March 16, 1968, about two weeks after the final battles related to Tet were subdued by U.S. troops, a company of the Americal division murdered hundreds of Vietnamese civilians. Americans would not find out that these events occurred until late 1969, but the events of 1968 are pivotal to understanding why and how the My Lai Massacre happened. For Americans who thought that the world was becoming a dark, unrecognizable place, the worst was yet to come.

[42] Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 350.
[43] Ibid.

Chapter 2

> *Among the most important and disappointing of them was that some people--most, it seems--will, under some circumstances, do anything someone in authority tells them to. Another is that government institutions, like most humans, have a reflexive reaction to the exposure of internal corruption and wrongdoing: No matter how transparent the effort, their first response is to lie, conceal and cover up.*
>
> —Ron Ridenhour[44]

March 16, 1968

For the men of Charlie Company, the morning of March 16, 1968, began just as many others had since their December arrival in the Quang Ngai Province of Vietnam. Assigned to Task Force Barker for a mission that day, the soldiers and officers of the company awoke in the early hours and gathered their gear. They assembled in their platoons, and one by one boarded the helicopters that were to escort them into battle. The events of that Tuesday morning gave no indication of what was to come when they arrived in My Lai (4). Though the actions of the company may have been familiar or even routine to the young soldiers, an underlying, newly-surfaced tension was felt by every man preparing to journey from the relative safety of base camp. After the Tet Offensive, the morale of soldiers army-wide had begun to wane, as well as their ability to sympathize with the Vietnamese people. Where soldiers once saw women and children and friendly faces, they now saw possible threats and enemies attempting to lure them into a false sense of security. This resentment within Charlie Company was brought to its boiling point on March 14, when "a well-liked and respected sergeant… George Cox, was blown to

[44] Ron Ridenhour, "Perspective on My Lai," *Los Angeles Times*, March 16, 1993, accessed April 25, 2018, http://articles.latimes.com/1993-03-16/local/me-363_1_vietnam-war.

pieces by a booby trap that also inflicted terrible injuries on two soldiers with him."[45] It was with this mindset that Charlie Company awoke on March 16, unsure of what the day would bring but determined to bring the enemy to its knees.

On March 15, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Barker, the commanding officer of the task force, issued the orders for the unit's operation the following day; in a meeting with his officers, the lieutenant colonel not only relayed details about the mission itself, but also informed the men that the only people that remained in the village were the 48th Viet Cong Local Force Battalion and communist sympathizers. Heavy resistance was expected.[46] Among the officers in this meeting was Captain Ernest Medina, a respected soldier and commanding officer of Charlie Company within the Americal Division. Following Medina's briefing with Lt. Col. Barker, he returned to his company, which was split into three platoons led by Lt. William Calley, Lt. Stephen Brooks, and Lt. Jeffrey LaCross. Medina explained the timeline of the following day's events to his men, just as he had done numerous times since his arrival in Vietnam. He impressed upon the platoon leaders and their soldiers that this would most likely be the toughest fight that the company had seen since their deployment. This would be their chance to avenge the deaths of the men that they had lost. He also emphasized, as Barker had done with him and the other captains, that those that remained in the villages would be enemy combatants and sympathizers. Though nervous, the men of Charlie Company were also eager to face the enemy in a way that they had not yet experienced in Quang Ngai: through direct combat.

The men of Task Force Barker were dropped just outside of My Lai (4) around 0730 that Tuesday morning. Those in command anticipated heavy resistance from the moment the men

[45] Jones, *My Lai*, 35.
[46] Allison, *My Lai*, 28.

landed. In an attempt to ward off any possible opposition at the landing zone, the surrounding vegetation was heavily mortared. No enemy fire was returned, despite the area being deemed "hot" by the first helicopter that touched down.[47] Once the entirety of Charlie company landed, they began moving slowly through the jungle, firing at any perceived movement that could be Viet Cong. At approximately 0800, first and second platoons, led by Calley and Brooks, advanced towards the village, firing upon any Vietnamese villagers that crossed their path, their association to the Viet Cong unknown. Upon their arrival in My Lai (4), the soldiers were tasked with burning Vietnamese homes, destroying bunkers, and processing any suspected Viet Cong. Little did the Americans know that the Viet Cong Battalion that normally inhabited the area had most likely been alerted to the raid by spies within either the U.S. chain of command or the ARVN. The battalion cleared the area the day before, leaving only a few stragglers behind.[48]

Though no one knows exactly how the My Lai Massacre started, there is no question that it began early and indiscriminately. Villagers were removed from their homes, herded together like livestock, and mowed down by machine guns or personal weapons. As a witness for the prosecution in the court martial of Lieutenant William Calley, Private First Class Paul Meadlo described one instance of brutality that he personally took part in. After rounding up what he believed to be thirty to fifty men, women, and children, he proceeded to guard them in a designated area for detainees. He did so for about fifteen minutes until his platoon leader Lt. William Calley began chastising him. Meadlo testified about the events that followed:

> [Calley] said, "How come they're not dead?" I said, "I didn't know we were supposed to kill them." He said, "I want them dead." He backed off twenty or thirty feet and started

[47] Hersh, *My Lai* 4, 45.
[48] Allison, *My Lai*, 33-34.

> shooting into the people -- the Viet Cong -- shooting automatic. He was beside me. He burned four or five magazines. I burned off a few, about there. I helped shoot 'em.[49]

Throughout his testimony, Meadlo defended himself, Calley, and the other members of his platoon; he vehemently insisted that those he found in the village were either Viet Cong or communist sympathizers. There are also reports of monks being killed by soldiers. Do Chuc, a Vietnamese peasant who survived the massacre, reiterated the events to investigative journalist Seymour Hersh. The 48-year-old "watched as the GIs set up a machine gun…The people began crying and begging. One monk showed his identification papers to a soldier, but the American simply said, 'Sorry.' Then the shooting started."[50]

As soldiers traveled up and down the country roads, they continued to round up and shoot Vietnamese villagers, many of whom screamed pleas like "No VC!" with their dying breath. Ronald Haeberle, an Army photographer, was sent with the men to record what was supposed to be a harrowing battle for posterity. As Haeberle traveled amongst the soldiers, he was astounded by the cruelty and apathy that he witnessed. Walking down a trail just north of Son My in Binh Tay, the photographer came across some soldiers surrounding a group of women and children. The young men screamed at the Vietnamese, asking the women, "VC boom? VC boom?" This was the soldiers' way of asking if the woman was a Viet Cong concubine. The men were weary of Haeberle's camera, one soldier even warning the rest to its presence. After taking a picture of the detainees that he believed were going to be interrogated by the soldiers, the young photographer continued down the path on his own. Haeberle "had only gone a few yards when someone said: 'Let's waste them.' [He] looked back over his shoulder to see that the group of

[49] Douglas O. Linder, "The My Lai Massacre and Courts-Martial: An Account," Famous Trials, accessed April 16, 2018, http://www.famous-trials.com/mylaicourts/1656-myl-intro.
[50] Hersh, *My Lai 4*, 51.

women and children had fallen to the ground."[51] This picture taken by Haeberle would appear over a year later in *Life* magazine and become one of the most well-known images that would haunt American citizens when the truth finally came out about My Lai. [52]

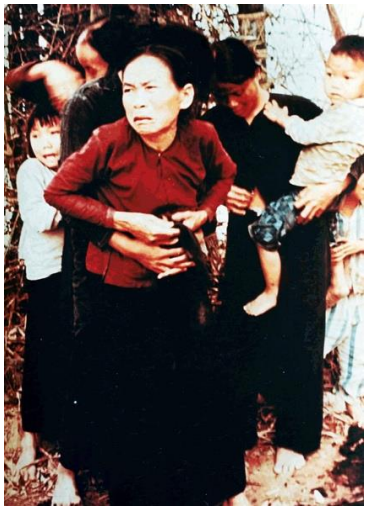

Figure 1

During the Vietnam War, some American soldiers raped women as a way of "proving their prowess and power [within the ranks], perhaps as a rite of passage to manhood, which they enhanced by their boasting and… by providing voyeurs with something to look at on the pathway, inside a doorless hooch, or in close quarters."[53] This is not a phenomenon unique to Vietnam; rape has been used as a weapon by both sides of every war since Ancient Rome and continues to be wielded as a means of conquering a population's spirit. Analysis of French records by Prof. Mary Louise Roberts revealed that American troops, members of what has

[51] Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours*, 132.
[52] See Figure 1. Department of the Army, *Report of the Department of the Army Review of the Preliminary Investigations Into the My Lai Incident*, book 6, vol. 3 (1970), 40, https://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/pdf/RDAR-Vol-IIIBook6.pdf.
[53] Jones, *My Lai*, 81.

become known as "the Greatest Generation," sexually assaulted French women during World War II after the U.S. invasion of Normandy.[54]

American soldiers gang raped numerous women and girls in both the village of Son My and the surrounding area. Many of the soldiers of Charlie Company were already referred to as "double veterans," an honor reserved for those who had raped a woman before he killed her. Some of these women, whose only crime was being born in the wrong part of the world, "were raped and sodomized, mutilated, and had their vaginas ripped open with knives and bayonets. One woman was killed when the muzzle of a rifle barrel was inserted into her vagina and the trigger was pulled."[55] Testimony from multiple soldiers on the ground confirmed that some women were attacked by upwards of ten soldiers, leaving them so broken that in the end they were unable to run away or even move. Though it is estimated that over twenty girls were subjected to these vicious attacks,[56] dozens more were forced to strip for the men of Charlie Company, attempting to modestly cover themselves while the soldiers laughed and mocked them. Sgt. Gary Roschevitz ordered seven women to remove their clothes, the consequence of disobeying the order being death by buckshot. They complied, hoping that their silence would bring them mercy. When Roschevitz demanded sexual favors from one of the younger girls in the crowd, they all began screaming and pleading for their lives. The sergeant then stepped back and used his M-79 grenade launcher to silence them.[57]

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[54] Ibid., 341.
[55] Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours*, 129.
[56] Valerie Wieskamp, "Sexual Assault and the My Lai Massacre: The Erasure of Sexual Violence From Public Memory of the Vietnam War," in *Mythologizing the Vietnam War*, ed. Jennifer Good, Paul Lowe, Brigitte Lardinois, and Val Williams (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 134.
[57] Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours*, 130-131.

In the years following the My Lai Massacre, the person most closely associated with the carnage would be Lt. William Calley. Though he was far from the only man involved in the heinous acts that occurred on that March morning, Calley's name and his story would be repeated thousands of times, both in print and on air. The Florida native was the commander of Charlie Company's 1st Platoon, the unit that was credited with killing the most people during the mission.[58] As the platoon advanced through the village, Calley ordered his men to kill any Vietnamese they came across and would later claim that he himself was merely following the orders of Capt. Medina. Those villagers that were not shot on sight were gathered by first platoon and corralled by an irrigation ditch on the edge of the village. Onlookers estimated that roughly seventy-five Vietnamese were held in that area by Calley and some of his men; the detainees were primarily women, children, and the elderly.

Private Second Class Harry Stanley would later provide the Army Investigators scrutinizing the killings with a clear depiction of the events that followed. According to Stanley, Lt. Calley ordered the men standing by the ditch to push the detainees into the hole, only a few men complied. Under the Lieutenant's orders, Paul Meadlo and a number of other men opened fire. Meadlo later estimated that he himself killed at least twenty to twenty-five people. Those who were still complying with Calley's orders unloaded magazine after magazine into the pit, shooting anything that moved and even throwing in a few grenades for good measure. After the shooting ended, "a two-year-old boy miraculously crawled out of the ditch, crying. He began running toward the hamlet. Someone hollered, 'There's a kid.'…Then Calley ran back, grabbed the child, threw him back in the ditch and shot him."[59]

[58] Allison, *My Lai,* 21.
[59] Hersh, *My Lai 4*, 58, 63-64.

Not all members of Charlie Company participated in the killings at My Lai (4). Despite orders given by commanding officers on the ground, especially Lt. Calley, many soldiers refused to partake in what they believed was senseless murder. The conscious decision to disobey a direct military order is a serious offense within all branches of the U.S. Army; soldiers can be brought up on charges under court-martial, or, in some cases, be killed in action should their behavior be deemed potentially dangerous to the other members of their unit. Some of the men of Charlie Company, like platoon medic George Garza, attempted to provide what little medical aid they could to Vietnamese children who had been injured in the raid on Son My, urging them to run away or hide as best they could. Leonard Gonzalez, a soldier assigned to the left flank of the second platoon, tried to ease the suffering of those dying that he came across while sweeping the area beyond the tree line of the village. He gave out water and attempted to make them as comfortable as possible, though there wasn't much he could do. After tending to a young girl who suffered a gunshot wound to the chest, he continued walking down the path. Gonzalez had only taken a few steps when he heard a fellow soldier put a bullet in her head.[60]

As part of the operation, helicopters continuously swept the area, providing ground troops air support and shooting at those they thought to be around military age. One of the pilots was a warrant officer by the name of Hugh Thompson, a well-liked and well-respected Georgian from a working class Southern family that fit "the image of the hotshot aviator: tall, dark, and handsome."[61] In the years following the events at Son My, Thompson would become known as the hero of My Lai for the actions of both himself and his crew on that March morning. Thompson arrived at Son My with the rest of the outfit, but noticed the number of bodies piling

[60] Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours*, 117.
[61] Ibid., 135.

up as the morning went on. The pilot, along with his crew chief, Specialist 4th class Glenn Andreotta, and gunner, Specialist 4th class Lawrence Colburn, witnessed the shooting of a number of injured Vietnamese, their status as communists or communist sympathizers unknown, in and around the village. After marking one woman's location in order for her to receive medical aid, Thompson witnessed a captain, who he would later identify as Ernest Medina, nudge the young girl to see if she was alive. She made a slight movement and Medina shot her point blank.[62]

WO Thompson then continued to circle the area when SP4 Andreotta spotted what appeared to be a canal ditch filled with dead and wounded Vietnamese. Thompson landed the helicopter, hoping to evacuate some of the wounded and allow them to receive medical attention. Almost immediately, a lieutenant that would later be identified as William Calley angrily approached the pilot, attempting to assert his own authority over the situation. When Thompson turned his back and headed towards the chopper, Calley and Sergeant David Mitchell began firing into the canal ditch, killing any and all wounded that could have possibly survived the first round of shootings. It was at this moment that Thompson realized that he and his crew were going to have to intervene if they wanted to save Vietnamese lives.[63]

The three men were only in the air for a brief period before they saw a small bunker near the drainage ditch that had a number of women and children within it. Thompson lowered the helicopter once again as he watched Calley and his men approach the Vietnamese. This time, he was not going to stand by idly and allow noncombatants to be killed. Instead, Thompson turned to Colburn, the gunner aboard the helicopter, and ordered him to remain alert while he attempted

[62] Allison, *My Lai*, 43.
[63] Hersh, *My Lai 4*, 64.

to extract the civilians. In no uncertain terms, Thompson told his crew "that if any of the Americans opened up on the Vietnamese, [they] should open up on the Americans."[64] Thompson used his body as a shield between the livid Calley and his men as nine Vietnamese were rescued by the helicopters. After picking up the men and women from the bunker, Thompson's crew took off again, continuing to circle.

A few minutes later, the crew landed for the third and final time near the ditch that Calley was still continuing to shoot into. Andreotta thought he saw a child moving in the ditch, so both he and Colburn emerged from the helicopter and approached the bodies. This time they received no resistance from the men on the ground. Andreotta climbed into the ditch, leaving him knee-deep in human remains. The young child was found amidst the carnage, still clutching his mother who was long since deceased. The small boy was carried by the crew chief back to the helicopter. Thompson and his men then delivered the child to the local hospital, leaving My Lai (4) and the nightmarish morning behind them.[65] Remarkably, it was only 10 AM.

Throughout the morning, Major General Koster, Colonel Henderson, and Lt. Col. Barker, all ranking members of the Americal Division, were allocated various air lanes to oversee the mission from above. These commanding officers all had access to the various radio signals being used by military forces both in the air and on the ground. They heard WO Thompson's frenzied calls about massive civilian casualties in the village. None of them acted on the information, but they did question Medina as to what was going on. Out of curiosity, Henderson ordered his helicopter to fly lower, reaching only 100 feet above the ground. It was there that the colonel saw what he observed to be "six to eight non-combatant casualties in Charlie Company's area of

[64] Ibid., 65.
[65] Ibid., 66.

operations."[66] Henderson then radioed to Barker, warning him of the consequences of civilian fatalities.

It is unclear why exactly Medina gave the order to cease all killing in Son My and when exactly it was given. Most historians agree that the order was handed down by Barker to Medina sometime between 10:30 and 11:30 AM, even though the killing for the most part had subsided by then.[67] Aside from a few isolated incidents that occurred throughout the rest of the day, the carnage of March 16 was put to rest with Medina's word. The remaining seventy villagers that were captured for questioning were subjected to interrogation by Vietnamese police as well as American soldiers using brutal tactics. The violence of that morning was unparalleled by any actions taken during this later period. The only GI wounded during the operation was Private First Class Herbert Carter, who was shot in the foot with his own weapon; there is ongoing controversy amongst historians about whether the gun jammed and accidentally misfired or the young soldier shot himself in an attempt to leave Vietnam and the carnage that he had witnessed.[68] In the combat action report filed by Lt. Col. Barker, 128 enemy combatants were reported Killed in Action with 3 weapons captured.[69] The press, both in Vietnam and the United States, celebrated Charlie Company's outstanding triumph in battle. In a statement, Barker remarked that the unit had lost two men in the firefight and twelve others were injured. In the eyes of both the military and the American public, Task Force Barker had been a success and was "capped by the largest body count ever recorded by [Charlie Company] in a single day's

[66] Belknap, *The Vietnam War on Trial*, 77.
[67] Allison, *My Lai*, 48.
[68] Jones, *My Lai*, 117.
[69] James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, eds. *My Lai: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998), 30.

fighting."[70] In the years following the massacre, historians, both American and Vietnamese, have come to accept the actual death toll to be 504 men, women, and children.[71]

No One's Ever Going to Know

Rumors about March 16 spread rapidly amongst the soldiers. Members of Charlie Company confided in friends from other units, but none went public with the story. The only man who took the initiative to try to file an official complaint about the conduct of the officers and soldiers in Son My was Hugh Thompson. Upon his return to base, Thompson and his crew went directly to his company commander, Major Frederick Watke, and described exactly what happened on the ground and the carnage that he witnessed at the hands of Charlie Company. Lawrence Kubert, the operations sergeant on duty, later described the interaction between Thompson and Watke: the pilot and his men "were white, their faces were drawn… They were very tense, very angry… The whole feeling—it wasn't just one man, it was three or four saying the same thing, the look, the force that they put out was one of seeing something terrible. And these are men that are used to seeing death."[72] This was the first official report made by Thompson to a superior about the massacre that he had seen take place. At first, Watke did not take Thompson's charges seriously. He thought the helicopter crew had witnessed approximately twenty to thirty civilians killed in the crossfire of military battle; the crew then engaged in a dispute with ground troops, both of which could be detrimental to all of their careers. After deliberation about the possible effects the accusations could have on the major's future, Watke

[70] Jones, *My Lai*, 126.
[71] Ibid., 341.
[72] Hersh, *Cover-Up*, 115.

decided to go to Barker with the allegations made by the flight crew. This was mostly out of fear of both not relaying a serious allegation of a war crime and not reporting an apparent confrontation between soldiers under his command and those under Lt. Col. Barker. After Cap. Medina denied the allegations, Barker dismissed the complaint as without merit.[73] This would be the first of three attempts made by Thompson to bring justice to those in Son My and the first deliberate attempt by military and governmental personnel to cover up the My Lai Massacre.

Major Watke was not the only person that Hugh Thompson reached out to in the wake of the killings in Son My. When the Warrant Officer returned to base, he sought out the advice and aid of Captain Carl Cresswell, an Episcopalian priest and friend of Thompson. The pilot relayed the day's events to the chaplain, who encouraged Thompson to file a report with his superiors while Cresswell also conveyed the message through what he described as "Chaplain Channels." Cresswell approached the senior chaplain, Lt. Col. Francis Lewis, who made inquiries about the killings at My Lai to multiple officers. Lewis was told by several men, including Maj. Gen. Koster's chief of staff, that an investigation was underway and that he should not be concerned. In the end, Lewis accepted the narrative created by those in command of the division, saying, "It was tragic that we killed these women and children, but it was in a combat operation. That is what I will report back to Colonel Henderson."[74] In the end, Thompson's version of the events was largely ignored by members of the military chain of command and deliberately hidden by those in a position of power to punish those responsible for the killings that took place on March 16.

[73] Ibid., 115-17.
[74] Jones, *My Lai*, 131.

Once Lt. Col. Barker rebuffed Major Watke, the young officer became suspicious of what exactly happened in the village on that morning. Watke would later testify to the Peers Commission, an army panel designated to investigate what happened at My Lai, that he found it very hard to believe that no one in the company would admit to seeing the altercation between Thompson and Calley. If the members of Charlie Company were lying about that incident, Watke wondered, what else were they lying about?[75] After carefully considering his next step, Watke decided to report the incident to Lt. Col. John L. Holladay, the aviation commander of the Americal Division. This action was mostly a preemptive attempt on Watke's part to shield himself from backlash should Thompson and his crew be reprimanded for interceding in an ongoing military operation. Holladay, however, was not as struck by the altercation between the men as the major was. Holladay was much more concerned about the alleged murders at Son My; whether he heard the allegations prior to his meeting with Watke is uncertain. Holladay warned the major that, should the allegations prove false, it would most likely end his military career. Watke, however, continued to stand by what Thompson had told him.[76]

Since the conversation ended up lasting past midnight, the two officers decided to wait until the morning to bring the allegations to Brigadier General George Young. The following day, Watke and Holladay went to speak to Young and update him on the events that had transpired. Unlike Holladay, Young was more troubled by the helicopter crew's threats to turn their guns on a fellow military officer rather than the high civilian death toll. Shooting Vietnamese could be explained, shooting a fellow soldier (or threatening to) would be more difficult. Throughout the day, Young discussed the problematic situation with Barker and

[75] Hersh, *Cover-Up*, 121.
[76] Ibid., 130-131.

Henderson and then informed the Americal Division Commanding Officer, Major General Koster, to Thompson's version of what happened on March 16.

The following day, all five of the officers met in confidence to find a solution as to how to proceed with the information that they had been given. Rather than report their findings to the Inspector General, it was decided that Col. Henderson would conduct his own investigation of what went on in Son My; an investigation could have led to a negative light being shed on both Charlie Company and the 11th Infantry Brigade. He began by interviewing Thompson and a few other men who were present on March 16. Thompson described the killings he witnessed in detail as well as the copious number of bodies that he observed both in the ditch and throughout the area. Henderson later stated that the young pilot had been overwhelmed by lack of combat experience, while Thompson insisted that he remained level-headed and straightforward while being interviewed by the colonel. Thompson was the only pilot that Henderson spoke to, even though there were a number of men in the air who would later corroborate the warrant officer's story.

Colonel Henderson also ventured into "Pinkville" to interview Captain Ernest Medina. Medina corroborated the fact that a helicopter similar to the type flown by Thompson had in fact been operating in the area. However, he denied the allegations of murder. The captain conceded that he had shot the wounded woman whom Thompson had dropped smoke near, but claimed that she moved suddenly and he feared that she was going to throw a grenade.[77] On the final leg of his investigation, Henderson gathered a few dozen members of Charlie Company to question them as to what had witnessed. This interrogation was little more than a farce. He "first told

[77] Belknap, *The Vietnam War on Trial*, 85.

them that as the new Brigade commander he wanted to thank them for doing a 'damn fine job' on the operation. He then revealed that 'unsubstantiated reports' alleged that Charlie Company killed some civilian noncombatants, which if true 'would certainly discolor the fine record that they had.'"[78] No one in Charlie Company admitted to any unnecessary killing. Not a single person interviewed by Col. Henderson was put under oath nor made to sign a written statement as to what happened during the March 16 mission.

After a brief three-day inquiry, Henderson gave an oral report to Maj. Gen. Koster "explain[ing] in a general way what Thompson had reported and informed [the major general] that, except for Medina, no one had substantiated the pilot's accusations."[79] No written report was requested or filed until two weeks later when Koster ordered Henderson to submit a written version of the information he gathered. Colonel Henderson later claimed he submitted a multipage report based on the evidence he gathered from the various interviews he conducted. It was never recovered nor seen by Koster or Young. Captain James Henderson, "who worked in the 11th Infantry Brigade [Tactical Operations Center], recalled seeing a one-page summary of allegations made by helicopter pilots concerning the operation of March 16-18, but investigators could locate neither the original nor any copies."[80]

While the colonel was finishing up his investigation, Lt. Col. Barker also ordered Cap. Medina to further inquire into the allegation of soldiers firing into a ditch containing dozens of human bodies. After a half-hearted inquest with platoon leaders as well as a few non-commissioned officers within Charlie Company, all of whom denied everything, Medina

[78] Allison, *My Lai*, 63.
[79] Belknap, *The Vietnam War on Trial*, 84.
[80] Allison, *My Lai*, 65.

reported back to Barker that there was no basis for Thompson's accusations. After reporting his findings to his commanding officer, Medina gathered Charlie Company and spoke to them about the command's investigation into the events of March 16. There are mixed accounts of what exactly the captain said to his men. The message, however, is certain: keep quiet, keep your heads down, keep your stories straight.[81] For the foreseeable future, that is exactly what Charlie Company did.

While these events were transpiring within the American ranks, reports were also surfacing from survivors and local officials within Quang Ngai province. Locals from Son My filed a report with their division of the Census Grievance Committee, a national program meant to provide an outlet for Vietnamese to file complaints about either the government or military actions. In reality, the secretly CIA-funded agencies were actually a part of Operation Phoenix, "a set of programs that sought to attack and destroy the political infrastructure of the [political branch of the Viet Cong] in South Vietnam."[82] The Census Grievance Committees would use information accumulated from locals to devise maps of the various districts and villages throughout the Vietnam that illustrated just how loyal those in the area were to the South Vietnamese government. Following the mass deaths at Son My, an official report began circulating from the Quang Ngai Province branch of the committee claiming that over 400 men, women, and children were killed by American soldiers at Son My. Nguyen Tuc Te, head of the office, forwarded a translation of the report to Lt. Col. William Guinn, who was serving as the deputy province advisor at the time. Guinn found it difficult to believe such a body count, but

[81] Ibid., 64.
[82] Andrew R. Finlayson, "A Retrospective on Counterinsurgency Operations," Central Intelligence Agency, June 26, 2008, https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol51no2/a-retrospective-on-counterinsurgency-operations.html.

was also aware of the heavy Viet Cong presence in the area. In the end, he forwarded the report to Henderson but made no effort to follow up himself.

On March 22, the village chief of Son My, Do Dinh Luyen, after hearing multiple rumors about mass killings in the area, submitted a written report to Lieutenant Tran Ngoc Tan, who was the chief for Son Tinh District, alleging "one American soldier had been killed and another two wounded, against forty-eight Viet Cong killed and fifty-two wounded, and most significantly that 570 civilians had been killed."[83] Tan wrote his own report and submitted it to his superiors, but also detailed an intense firefight between Viet Cong forces and American troops. The story rose through the ranks of the ARVN and made its way back to Henderson and Koster. In the end, the report was silenced as Viet Cong propaganda attempting to smear American troops and turn the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people against them. Colonel Henderson was ordered to write a two-page summary of his original inquiry and a recommendation for counter-propaganda campaigns against the Viet Cong narrative. With this final attempt to shroud the events of March 16 in the cloak of a by-the-book mission, the commanding officers of the 11th Infantry Brigade believed that they had adequately covered their tracks. Little did they know their secret would only be kept safe for a year.

The Truth Comes Out

There is no way of knowing whether the My Lai Massacre would have stayed buried had it not been for Ron Ridenhour. A twenty-three-year-old helicopter gunner from Arizona, Ridenhour was not much different from the hundreds of thousands of other men serving in the

[83] Allison, *My Lai*, 68.

U.S. Army in Vietnam. In 1967, Ridenhour was assigned to 70th Infantry Detachment (LRP), 1lth Light Infantry Brigade at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. It was there that Ridenhour became familiar with a man by the name of PFC Charles Gruver, who would later be assigned to Charlie Company in the 11th Infantry Brigade. Ridenhour and Gruver were not especially close during training, but greeted each other warmly upon recognizing one another in Chu Lai in April 1968. The two men sat down, shared a few beers, and swapped a couple of war stories. It was from Gruver that Ridenhour would first hear a detailed account of the My Lai Massacre.

When Ridenhour initially listened to Gruver recount the killings, he was shocked. He could not believe that American troops were capable of such calculated slaughter. In a letter to several political entities[84] in March of 1969, Ridenhour wrote:

> There were other men in the unit I was soon to be assigned to, "E" Company, 51st Infantry (LRP), who had been in Charlie Company at the time that Gruver alleged the incident at "Pinkville" had occurred. I became determined to ask them about "Pinkville" so that I might compare, their accounts with Pfc Gruver's.[85]

Over the course of the next couple of months, Ridenhour discretely spoke with former members of Charlie Company that had been reassigned to Echo Company of the 51st Infantry Brigade. Much to his surprise, Ridenhour found three corroborating witnesses who were in Son My on March 16 and confirmed what Gruver said as well as added to it.

[84] Ridenhour's letter was sent to many high-level officials, including President Richard Nixon, Secretary of State William Rodgers, chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Earl Wheeler, Sen. Everett Dirkesen, Sen. William Fullbright, Sen. Edward Kennedy, Sen. Eugene McCarthy, Sen. George McGovern, Sen. Barry Goldwater, and Rep. Morris Udall.
[85] Ridenhour "Ron Ridenhour Letter."

The gunner first spoke with PFCs Michael Terry and William Dougherty, both of whom corroborated that a mass killing had taken place. They also verified that commanding officers within the Americal Division had ordered the deaths. They spoke of mass graves and indiscriminate massacre. Ridenhour's major breakthrough occurred when he happened upon Sergeant Larry La Croix on a trip to the Chu Lai United Service Organization (USO). It was from La Croix that Ridenhour learned about the conduct of Lt. Calley and the savagery the chain of command failed to stop on the ground. La Croix described the actions of Calley in great detail to Ridenhour:

> When the first group was put together Kally ordered Pfc. Torres to man the machine-gun and open fire on the villagers that had been grouped together. This Torres did, but before everyone in the group was sown he ceased fire and refused to fire again. After ordering Torres to recommence firing several times, Lieutenant Kally took over the M-60 and finished shooting the remaining villagers in that first group himself.[86]

The final account described by Ridenhour was from PFC Michael Bernhardt, known by most as Bernie. Not only did Bernie substantiate the claims of the other soldiers that served in Charlie Company, but he also corroborated a cover-up by the officers. Before both he and Ridenhour were to return home to the United States, Bernhardt described a run in he had with a captain following the mission:

> Medina (Captain Ernest Medina) came up to me ("Bernie") and told me not to do anything stupid like write my congressman" about what had happened that day. Bernhardt assured Captain Medina that he had no such thing in mind. He had nine months left in Viet Nam and felt that it was dangerous enough just fighting the acknowledged enemy.[87]

[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.

Upon his return to the States, Ridenhour wrote a letter describing in detail what he had heard from the men of Charlie Company. On March 29, 1969, he "sent a five-page registered letter to thirty military, administrative, and congressional leaders, in which he revealed what he thought had happened in Pinkville."[88] The recipients were targeted due to their positions within the government, both Democrats and Republicans. The first person to respond was Arizona congressman Morris Udall, an anti-war representative who immediately called for a Congressional investigation of what happened in Son My by the House Armed Services Committee. At this point, General Westmoreland was no longer serving as the deputy commander of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) and was now stationed in Washington as the Chief of Staff of the United States Army. As soon as the letter surfaced, Congressional "Doves" bombarded the Army Chief of Staff's office with calls for an investigation by the Army. "The House Armed Services Committee had meanwhile drafted a response for its chair, L. Mendel Evers, to sign, calling on the army to investigate the charges. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird likewise sent the army a copy of the letter, meaning that by early April the Department of the Army had received more than a half-dozen copies."[89]

Westmoreland privately assured Ridenhour that a thorough investigation would be pursued and ordered Colonel Howard Whitaker to scrutinize the allegations before calling for a formal investigation. The very next day, Whitaker was in Chu Lai, pouring over records of the March 16 mission as well as personnel files for individual soldiers named in the letter. He found nothing to suggest that the heinous actions that Charlie Company was accused of committing had

[88] Jones, *My Lai*, 181.
[89] Ibid., 183.

taken place. In order for Ridenhour's letter to be factual, Whitaker told Westmoreland, there would have had to be a conspiracy on a massive scale. There was no evidence that he could find in the log books of the mission, nor any reports of civilian deaths in the operation assessments. Though he had trouble believing such a preposterous story about mass killings undertaken by the U.S. Army, the colonel ultimately suggested that a formal investigation by the military had to be undertaken, if for no other reason than to clear Charlie Company of any wrongdoing.[90]

A week after Whitaker ordered an investigation into the circumstances surrounding the operation in Son My, the case was assigned to an accomplished World War II veteran and newly appointed member of the Inspector General's office by the name of Colonel William Wilson. When Wilson first read Ridenhour's letter, he was less than certain about the truth behind the seemingly outlandish accusations. As a decorated combat veteran who had received a Purple Heart for his part in the invasion of Normandy, Colonel Wilson believed that he was more than qualified to differentiate between a war crime and the sobering reality of the dangers that war imposes on civilians[91].

Wilson immediately began his investigation, travelling across the country with a stenographer, Albert Smith, and interviewing 36 servicemen over the course of ten weeks. He first travelled to Phoenix, Arizona to speak directly with Ridenhour. From the very beginning, Wilson was deeply unsettled by the information that he compiled from the interviews he completed. He slowly began to believe the allegations of mass killings that took place in Son My. Wilson interviewed everyone named in the Ridenhour letter; they all ultimately admitted that everything in the correspondence was indeed true. In an interview in Fort Hood, Texas with

[90] Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours*, 222.
[91] Ibid., 223.

William Doherty, the young soldier recounted the magnitude of the killings and the toll it had on those who experienced it:

> "I dream about it a lot," he said of the mass killings. "This had been the first village where there was quite a bit of killing and there was a lot of women and children killed. That is what I think about. They were just all over the place. We walked by it the next day and there was so many flies we covered our faces as we walked through it."[92]

The first breakthrough in the case came from the interrogation of Captain Ernest Medina, the commanding officer of Charlie Company within the 11th Infantry Brigade. As Wilson's conversation with the Charlie Company Captain progressed, Medina became increasingly more agitated. In this state, Medina divulged two key points that would become pivotal to Wilson's investigation: he confirmed that there was a complaint filed by a helicopter pilot (later identified as Hugh Thompson) and colonels were aware of the allegations, but never filed a formal report. This was the first statement on the record received by Wilson that corroborated that high-level officers were aware of the killings and did not follow military procedures in its aftermath. The truly pivotal revelation came during Wilson and Medina's discussion of tracking down any notes or reports from Henderson's investigation. Under oath, Medina told Wilson, "Colonel Henderson did say he was conducting the investigation at the direction of the divisional commander. I think that was his exact statement."[93] The conspiracy, in other words, went all the way to the top of Americal Division.

At this point in his inquiry, Col. Wilson knew that a criminal investigation of the March 16 mission was going to have to take place. His next step was to interview Col. Henderson in

[92] Ibid., 226.
[93] Ibid., 229.

Washington. Henderson's confidence in his testimony impressed Wilson and other investigators, even though they knew he was lying. Henderson claimed that, prior to Lt. Col. Barker being killed in action, he had written up an official report on a formal investigation that he had conducted, which Henderson then endorsed. That investigation, however, never occurred and the report never existed.

One of the common threads between the various testimonies that Wilson witnessed was the brutality of Lt. William Calley. At the colonel's request, Calley was returned to the U.S. before his tour was completed and brought to Washington, where he was informed that he was under investigation. After consulting with a JAG officer, he declined to be interviewed by Wilson and was given strict orders to remain in Washington.[94]

The final and most crucial witness that Col. Wilson would interview was PFC Paul Meadlo. As stated prior, Meadlo was an active participant in the killing of civilians in Son My on March 16. The day after the My Lai Massacre, Meadlo had stepped on a mine that left him without a foot and was immediately discharged from the army. According to other members of the platoon, Meadlo was carried to the Medivac screaming at Calley, crying, "God will punish you. If you don't get out of the field, the same thing will happen to you."[95] The nervous, stuttering Meadlo was a shell of the young, naïve Midwesterner that he had been before the war. During his interview with the PFC at his home in Terre Haute, Wilson was bombarded with tale after tale of atrocities that took place in Son My at the hands of Lt. Calley and the other soldiers in Charlie Company. This interview was the final piece Wilson needed to write his report corroborating the accusations put forth in Ridenhour's letter.

[94] Ibid., 231-232.
[95] Belknap, *The Vietnam War on Trial*, 88.

Colonel Wilson interviewed three dozen members of Charlie Company and filled over 1,000 pages with accounts of murder and conspiracy among officers to cover up what had happened. The report was thorough and sent shock waves through Westmoreland's office. The Army Chief of Staff reassigned the case to Army Criminal Investigation Division (CID) and Chief Warrant Officer Ande Feher took over the investigation. Feher picked up right where Wilson ended, continuing to interview Charlie Company members and traveling the country looking for corroborative evidence. He found his first breakthrough in an unlikely place: Ridgeville, Ohio.

On August 25, Feher traveled to Ridgeville to interview Ron Haeberle, the photographer that was assigned to capture the "great battle" that was supposed to take place on March 16. To his surprise, Haeberle had been "showing these [photos] as part of an illustrated talk on the Vietnam War he had given to Optimist, Kiwanis, and Jaycee clubs, a teachers' association, a church youth group, and even some high school students."[96] The photographer shared both the black-and-whites he had officially taken for the army, as well as many color pictures that he had snapped with his personal camera. This revelation became the first concrete evidence of the My Lai Massacre. These pictures, along with the mountains of evidence compiled by Wilson and the Army Criminal Investigations Division, gave prosecutors enough to finally take the investigation to the next level. On September 5, 1969, Lt. William Calley was charged for the murder of 107 Vietnamese civilians just one day before he was supposed to be discharged from service at Fort Benning, Georgia.[97]

[96] Ibid., 111.
[97] Ibid., 111-112.

In the wake of My Lai, Gen. Westmoreland and other top army commanders feared the possibility of being blindsided by future atrocities. At the beginning of 1970, Westmoreland set up a secret task force within his office that would become known as the Vietnam War Crimes Working Group. The officers within the group were already part of Westmoreland's staff, but their focus was shifted to monitoring any possible war crimes that occurred in Vietnam. By the end of the war, the working group had amassed "files including 300 allegations of massacres, murders, rapes, torture, assaults, mutilations, and other atrocities that were substantiated by army investigators. They detailed the deaths of 137 civilians in mass killings, and 78 smaller-scale attacks in which Vietnamese civilians were killed, wounded, and sexually assaulted."[98] The Vietnam War Crimes Working Group's primary goal was not to identify war crimes and bring the perpetrators to justice. Instead, they were tasked with discovering atrocities before the press did and burying them. To this task force, these tactics used by soldiers were nothing more than a public relations problem; to the Vietnamese, they were devastating.

While Army CID continued its investigation into criminal charges, Secretary of the Army Stanley Resor decided to create a separate inquiry into the conspiracy that kept My Lai hidden for over a year. In November of 1969, the Peers Commission was established under the leadership of Lt. Gen. William Peers, a seasoned veteran who had served in World War II, China, Burma, and Vietnam. The deadline for charging military personnel for their role in the killings was March 16, 1970, so Peers was forced to work quickly and efficiently. Over the course of four months, Peers and his team would interview "almost four hundred witnesses… [and] produce over 20,000 pages of testimony, plus hundreds of directives, reports, and other

[98] Turse, *Kill Anything,* 14-15.

pieces of evidence."[99] The findings of the Peers Inquiry were damning to both Charlie Company and the chain of command that oversaw them. Following the investigation, numerous other members of Task Force Baker were charged with various indictments of murder, assault and rape.

Peers was not the only government official investigating the massacre. As My Lai bombarded the front pages of international publications, South Carolina Representative L. Mendel Rivers, the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, ordered a full Congressional investigation of the killings. After several days of public hearings, Rivers collected enough evidence to appoint Democrat F. Edward Hébert of Louisiana to conduct a separate, closed hearing examination of My Lai. This independent, bipartisan subcommittee's goal, according to Hébert, "was to put a halt to the string of courts martial looming ahead. If any crimes occurred, it was the army and not the solider who was responsible."[100] After two months of testimony, the members of the subcommittee ultimately concluded that the Americal chain of command did in fact cover up the "allegations" of what occurred at My Lai. The larger issue that arose from the closed executive Hébert Hearings was a violation of the Jencks Act of 1957, which required "a government agency questioning principals in a criminal investigation to make their testimonies available to the federal courts on request."[101] In the months following these congressional hearings, the "Subcommittee on the My Lai Incident" would cause massive problems for those attempting to punish the perpetrators of the My Lai Massacre for their crimes.

[99] Allison, *My Lai*, 84.
[100] Jones, *My Lai*, 240.
[101] Ibid., 241.

Justice?

Following the Peers Committee, dozens of men were accused of wrongdoing in connection with the killings at Son My, both directly in the massacre and the conspiracy to conceal them from the public. Though nearly thirty men were indicted on charges related to the My Lai Massacre, only six of the cases went to trial due to a lack of evidence and the statutes of limitations. In the end, only one of the men would be found guilty of any charges.

The court-martial of Sergeant David Mitchell began on October 6, 1970. The soldier stood trial for assault with intent to murder in Fort Hood, Texas. From the beginning of opening arguments, the case was essentially decided. Colonel George Robinson, the judge on Mitchell's case, immediately ruled that any and all testimony given by those who testified in front of the congressional subcommittee was inadmissible; Congress refused to release the transcript of what was said during the hearings. With this one ruling, the judge destroyed the prosecution's case, leaving them with only three witnesses compared to the defense's twenty. Only one of these three soldiers, Specialist Fourth Class Charles Sledge said that he saw Mitchell shooting civilians. The jury was out for seven hours before it returned with a not guilty verdict.[102]

The next court-martial scheduled to begin was the most anticipated by the American people, who were following the story intently in the headlines. Lt. William "Rusty" Calley was standing trial for six counts of premeditated murder of 109 Vietnamese civilians. If convicted, Calley could be executed under military law. The lieutenant's formidable defense team was made up of three attorneys: Major Kenneth Raby, a JAG (Judge Advocate General) officer who represented Calley during the Peers Inquiry, George Latimer, a former Utah Supreme Court

[102] Ibid., 257.

Justice with a history of defending soldiers accused of murdering Vietnamese, and Richard Kay, a civilian attorney out of Cleveland, Ohio. The lead Army prosecutor was young JAG Captain Aubrey Daniel, who made up in unyielding moral idealism what he lacked in trial experience. The case was presided over by Col. Kennedy, a fair and level-headed judge who was known for his impartiality and ability to separate personal and professional feelings within the courtroom.

On November 17, 1970, Calley plead not guilty and the opposing sides began to present their case in front a jury of 6 officers— a colonel, four majors, and a captain.[103] From the beginning, Lt. Calley's defense team struggled to present a coherent and convincing defense. Almost every witness for the defense was discredited on cross-examination. None of the defense attorneys seemed to be on the same page and consistently put forth conflicting strategies to outwit Daniel and the prosecution. Latimer, the lead attorney, spoke in a monotone for the majority of the trial and presented arguments that were neither persuasive nor interesting. Over the course of the 77 day trial, the Calley's attorneys attempted a number of defenses. Ultimately, they settled on a mental capacity argument in which expert witnesses claimed that Calley was unable to make a decision as complex as premeditated murder. Daniel immediately debunked the flimsy theory put forth by the witness, pointing out that he had never even spent time with Calley before presenting the testimony to the court.

The prosecution questioned multiple witnesses who testified that Calley not only murdered dozens of Vietnamese, but also ordered subordinates to take part as well. Calley even admitted to some of the accusations made against him under cross-examination, though he continued to claim that he was acting under orders. After deliberating for 79 hours, the jury

[103] Allison, *My Lai*, 97.

found Lt. Calley guilty of killing twenty-two Vietnamese civilians. He was sentenced to life in prison, but was put under house arrest while his case was heard by the Court of Appeals after interjection by President Nixon. After a series of petitions for leniency, the court ruled that Calley's three years of house arrest would count as time served, and he was released on November 19, 1974.

Meanwhile at Fort McPherson, another Georgia military base, Sergeant Charles Hutto was facing court-martial for the murder of a group of unarmed civilians whom he shot with an M-60 machine gun. Not only did the military judge presiding over the case allow the entrance of congressional witnesses, but Hutto had also admitted to CID on record that he killed defenseless villagers. When his signed statement was read for the jury, neither the sergeant nor his attorney refuted that the events had taken place. The case seemed open and shut. Hutto's lawyer, a civilian by the name of Edward Magill, conceded that the young soldier did in fact take part in the killing, but argued that he was not legally responsible for his action. The defense's case relied almost entirely on the testimony of Dr. Norman Reichberg, a clinical psychologist, who claimed that Hutto,

> who had grown up in a poor, rural part of Louisiana, lacked the capacity to make a judgment concerning whether [a directive to kill] was legal or illegal. Hutto's personality was marked by a total lack of creativity and a willingness to believe others and to submit to orders from authority figures.[104]

In the end, the defense's argument that Hutto was too ignorant to murder prevailed and the jury returned a not guilty verdict within two hours.

[104] Belknap, *The Vietnam War on Trial*, 225.

After the continuous failure to convict perpetrators other than Lt. Calley, the prosecution of Captain Medina was taken on by Major Eckhardt, the chief prosecutor for the My Lai trials. Medina, in turn, hired the famed defense attorney F. Lee Bailey, who was then known for defending Albert DeSalvo, better known as the Boston Strangler, and would later defend Patty Herst and O.J. Simpson before he was disbarred in 2001. After various attempts to get the court-martial dismissed through legal and political means, the defense and prosecution began presenting their cases on August 11, 1971. The company commander was charged with two counts of aggravated assault, the murder of an adult female and a small boy, and the premeditated murder of over 100 Vietnamese civilians at the hands of his men.[105] In order to convict Medina of the latter charge, Eckhardt had to prove that the captain was aware of the fact that his men were committing these war crimes and did nothing to stop them from occurring. Bailey rebutted this accusation, arguing that Medina had no idea what his men were doing inside the village; the captain, according to the defense, was surveying the perimeter of the hamlet for the majority of the morning.

The foundation of the defense's argument rest on the assertion that the order to murder came from Lt. Calley, not Cap. Medina. The second the captain became aware of the killings, Bailey contended, he ordered a cease fire.[106] Eckhardt put dozens of witnesses on the stand to demonstrate that, even though Medina may not have directly ordered the death of civilians, he still had knowledge that such atrocities were taking place. One after another, the prosecution's witnesses folded under cross-examination. None could place Medina directly in the village nor within visual range of the actual killing. When the captain finally took the stand, he "firmly

[105] Ibid., 229.
[106] Allison, *My Lai*, 117.

denied knowing that his men had killed civilians and toward the end of the trial the judge reduced the murder charge to one of involuntary manslaughter of one hundred My Lai villagers."[107] The jury eventually acquitted Medina after deliberating for less than an hour.

Captain Eugene Koutoc, an intelligence officer with the 11th Infantry Brigade, was brought up on charges for aggravated assault for the maiming of a prisoner. Koutoc, an average soldier at best, was known for his lack of discipline. With former Governor Robert Crosby acting for the defense, Koutoc asserted that he had not meant to cut off the Vietnamese villagers finger clean off, but rather slipped. The defense was ludicrous when one considers the fact that an Army surgeon for the prosecution testified that the action would have taken considerable physical strength; chopping off a finger is not an easy feat.[108] Not only was the captain found not guilty of aggravated assault, but, as he was walking out he "was asked if he would stay in the military: 'Who would want to get out of a system like this? …it's the best damn army in the world,' he said."[109] The better question would have been: why would he ever want to leave an organization that let him act on his darkest impulses and get away with it?

The final My Lai court-martial was that of Colonel Henderson, who was accused of obstructing the investigation into the My Lai Massacre, as well as perjury before the Peers Inquiry. The official charge was dereliction of duty. Henderson's civilian attorney attempted to get the colonel's Peers testimony thrown out in pretrial motions, to no avail. Though Hugh Thompson and the other pilots flying over Son My that morning testified about their continuous radios to command, Henderson systematically denied that he knew of the vast nature of the

[107] Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours*, 348.
[108] Ibid., 346.
[109] Ibid., 346-347.

killings. He admitted that he had heard Thompson's allegations, but chose to believe Medina's word, which was that the number of civilian deaths had not exceeded twenty-eight.[110] In the end, the jury of two generals and five colonels believed the decorated veteran and found him not guilty of any wrongdoing.

[110] Belknap, *The Vietnam War on Trial*, 233.

Chapter 3

We Americans are tired of a war that can't be won,
Where a soldier is charged with murder if he uses his gun.
We never want to see another soldier crucified.
Lt. Calley done his job and he was hung to dry.

—Big Bill Johnson[111]

Who held the rifle? Who gave the orders?
Who planned the campaign to lay waste the land?
Who manufactured the bullet? Who paid the taxes?
Tell me, is that blood upon my hands?

—Pete Seeger[112]

The Court of Public Opinion

In the early and mid-twentieth century, Americans believed that both the government and its military acted within a fundamental moral code that allowed them to claim superiority in times of strife or conflict. They trusted their government to make the right decisions. It was a time when people felt politicians were informed and on their side. America was the good guy. Once news of the My Lai Massacre broke in the United States, anti-war politicians and media outlets were sure that the tide of public opinion would turn against the war in Vietnam. To their shock, a great deal of Americans spoke out in support of Lt. Calley and the men of Charlie Company. Everywhere they looked, there seemed to be a fundamental lack of empathy and understanding for the Vietnamese who were killed in Son My. Street interviews carried out by both newspapers and television media indicated a disbelief that the events actually occurred. A salesman from Los Angeles told one reporter, "The story was planted by Vietcong sympathizers

[111] Big Bill Johnson, "Set Lt. Calley Free," REM Records #45-467, 1969, digital recording.
[112] Pete Seeger, "Last Train to Nuremberg," *Rainbow Race*, Columbia Records, 1973, digital recording.

and people inside this country who are trying to get us out of Vietnam sooner."[113] Many magazine and newspapers that published the photographs that Ron Haeberle had taken on the ground received hate mail and angry phone calls, many describing them as anti-American.[114] Right-wing hawks felt the pictures were irresponsible, unverified, and not fit to print; they claimed the liberal left media was profiteering off a story that was fundamentally inaccurate. At the end of the day, most Americans did not believe that an American soldier could commit the acts that Charlie Company was being accused of committing. It simply was not the American way.

In an unlikely turn of events, the trial of Lt. Calley managed to bring liberals and conservatives together on one central point: the young lieutenant was a scapegoat. On one hand, many on the left believed that low ranking officers like Calley were taking the blame for deficiencies throughout the chain of command; a lieutenant cannot disobey the direct order of a captain. The conservatives, on the other, felt that, though unfortunate, death was a part of war.[115] The discomfort of a few left-wing college students that had grown soft due to the excess of the United States in the late twentieth century was not their concern. The brutality of combat and war led young American men to commit atrocities that would be otherwise unthinkable to their fellow Americans. In short, sometimes horrible things had to be done in order to protect those at home. The stress of war and the pain of losing comrades in the field made the deaths of the civilians at Son My an unfortunate, but inevitable, byproduct of war itself. Overall, the massacre's largest influence within American culture was an increase in widespread resentment

[113] Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 442.
[114] Ibid., 442.
[115] Patrick Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials, and the Politics of Healing* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 60.

toward the administration's handling of Vietnam and growing suspicions about the legitimacy of what the government was telling the people about the war.

Throughout the trial, Calley became somewhat of a conservative hero amongst pro-war politicians and constituents. Many felt that the young lieutenant was being wrongly punished for doing what was necessary and common on both sides of every conflict; in American minds, he was being persecuted for being a good soldier. After news broke about the massacre, numerous organizations held rallies in support of Calley, raising money for his defense. The number of donations increased so rapidly that he had to open a bank account that people could mail donations to; within the first month, Calley received over $1,200 in contributions (roughly equivalent to $7,570 today).[116] A few months later, "six American Legion posts in Jacksonville, Florida announced plans to raise a $200,000 defense fund for Calley. The lieutenant was granted permission to leave Fort Benning and fly to Jacksonville, Florida for a fundraising party. He was greeted like a hero."[117] During an interview, one of the commanders of the posts told reporters that the issue was not whether or not the event took place, but that a soldier cannot be condemned for doing his duty. Fellow officers and soldiers were also outraged by the accusations of war crimes, claiming that an army cannot function if its members are too frightened of prosecution to carry out orders. During a religious revival taking place in Columbus, Georgia, Reverend Michael Lord declared in his sermon, "There was a crucifixion two thousand years ago of a man named Jesus Christ. I don't think we need another crucifixion of a man named Rusty Calley"[118].

[116] Hersh, *My Lai 4,* 153.

[117] Ibid., 154.

[118] Perlstein, *Nixonland,* 555.

"And Babies? And Babies."

Though there were many anti-war journalists reporting on Vietnam, many hesitated to criticize exactly what was taking place on the ground; "[embedded] correspondents whose reports radiated optimism about the war, and made little mention of those caught in its crossfire, were often favored with early information about battlefield developments and logistical assistance in getting out to the story."[119] Though Ron Ridenhour's letter to various elected officials gripped the attention of the United States government, it was not until Seymour Hersh published his exposé of the My Lai Massacre that most Americans had any idea that the events of March 16 had taken place. Even after months of promises from the Pentagon to bring justice to the people of Son My, Ridenhour was still worried that they Army would bury the massacre. He reached out to multiple reporters all over the country, none of whom were interested in the story. A freelance journalist in Washington D.C. and former press secretary to antiwar presidential candidate Sen. Eugene McCarthy, Hersh seemed like a prime candidate for exposing the wrongdoing that occurred at Son My. In an attempt to corroborate Ridenhour's story, Hersh called Fort Benning, inquiring with the information officer if he could give him any information on a classified trial that was occurring at the base. The officer declined to comment, but referred him to a brief *New York Times* article about the trial that had received little attention. It was then that Hersh realized that this was a real story.[120]

Over the next month, Hersh gathered evidence and information about Charlie Company and the March 16 mission, including a personal interview with Lt. Calley himself at Ft. Benning. After attempting to sell his completed story to both *Life* and *Look*, he decided to sell his article

[119] Oliver, *The My Lai Massacre*, 18.
[120] Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours*, 251-252.

via the newly formed Dispatch News Service, which was created to help circulate controversial stories to larger audiences. On November 13, thirty-five newspapers across the United States published Hersh's article. Though the story did not erupt immediately, the foundation was laid and the questions began. The day after Hersh's story was released, newsmen embedded in Vietnam "were taken to the village under armed escort by Americal Division troops and found it deserted, completely flat, and overgrown. Several mounds were found which were thought to be mass graves."[121] It would be difficult for the military cover-up to continue much longer, especially after Ron Haeberle's photographs were printed on the front page of the *Cleveland Plain-Dealer* a week later.

Paul Meadlo's CBS interview on November 24, 1969 forced the My Lai Massacre to the forefront of the national stage. Meadlo had helped Lt. Calley kill dozens of people and lost his foot to a landmine the following day. Over a year and half later, the private first class agreed to tell Mike Wallace, the famous CBS correspondent, what had happened at My Lai. Wallace, who worked on CBS's *60 Minutes* for thirty-seven years, was famous for his in-depth, intense interviews with world leaders and celebrities that were watched by millions of Americans every Sunday night.[122] Wallace pushed the young soldier to give more detail about who was targeted in the assault. At one point in the interview, the CBS correspondent asked point blank what kind of people were shot in the village.

> He was firing on automatic, which meant "you just spray the area," and he could not tell how many died because they were falling so quickly. "So I might have killed ten or fifteen of them."
> "Men, women, and children?"
> "Men, women, and children."

[121] Ibid., 255.
[122] CBS News, ""60 Minutes" Icon Mike Wallace Dies at 93," CBS News, April 26, 2012, accessed April 18, 2018, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/60-minutes-icon-mike-wallace-dies-at-93/.

"And babies?
"And babies."[123]

In this infamous interview that would be watched by millions, Meadlo publicly admitted that he had aided Charlie Company in killing what he thought may be close to 370 people. Once the segment aired, there was no way anyone could have stopped the massive scandal that was unfolding.

Almost immediately after the Meadlo interview, every newspaper in the country was writing about the My Lai Massacre. Like the American public, the coverage was greatly divided between horror, rage, and justifications. Esteemed publications from both ends of the political spectrum, such as *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New Yorker,* wrote stories about the need for America to withdraw its troops and stop its involvement in Vietnam, or else lose its soul entirely. Some intellectuals as well as research journals drew comparisons between Nazi death squads and the young men serving in Vietnam. Whether or not one believes such an accusation, the visual in late 1960s and early 1970s America was a controversial and explosive one utilized by the antiwar left to demonstrate the immorality of the war.

A number of publications followed suit with this line of thinking, but there was also many that starkly contrasted. A reporter writing for *National Review,* a conservative editorial magazine, commented, "If the Vietcong chooses to build its stronghold under a village, and the villagers, either through choice or coercion, continue to reside in the village, some perhaps to cooperate with the VC, does that mean the stronghold is immune to attack?"[124] The narrative that a soldier should not be tried for doing his American duty ran clear amongst conservative publications. Many went so far as to question whether or not the massacre actually happened. A

[123] Jones, *My Lai*, 220.
[124] Belknap, *The Vietnam War on Trial,* 130.

survey conducted by the *Minneapolis Tribune* found that almost fifty percent of those interviewed did not believe that the massacre had occurred at the hands of American soldiers, while only thirteen felt that the massacre was the fault of the troops involved. The conservative *National Review* reported in another article, "Everyone knows a guerrilla war such as is being waged in Vietnam is full of ambiguities."[125] On the international stage, the foreign press condemned American actions at Son My; the overwhelming majority believed that the moment Americans stooped to that level, they lost not only the war, but also their moral authority. Many prophesized that the massacre would result in an immediate withdraw of troops. Little did they know the war would drag on for four more painstaking years.

As the Charlie Company court martials proceeded, the growing polarization of Americans on the issue of the soldiers' innocence led to numerous manifestations of both sides in popular culture. For months, Americans could barely go a day without hearing about the My Lai Massacre and the trial of Lt. Calley. The anti-war movement used the massacre to raise awareness for the atrocities that were taking place in Vietnam. One of the most effective propaganda produced by the movement was a poster entitled *And Babies?*[126] created by Frazer Dougherty, Jon Hendricks, and Irving Petlin of the Art Workers Coalition. The poster "displays one of Ron Haeberle's photographs of the My Lai Massacre, showing some seventeen women's and children's bodies strewn where they had been shot on a dirt path."[127] Superimposed on the picture is the text: "Q: And babies? A. And babies." This was a direct quote from Paul Meadlo's CBS interview. The poster turned out to be one of the most powerful and memorable pieces ever

[125] Ibid. 131.
[126] See Figure 2. Ron Ridenhour et al., *Q. And Babies? A. And Babies.*, 1970, The Museum of Modern Art, New York City, in *The Museum of Modern Art*, accessed April 20, 2018, https://www.moma.org/collection/works/7272.
[127] Hagopian, *The Vietnam War*, 326.

produced by the anti-war movement and is closely associated with their efforts to this day. It is currently a part of the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

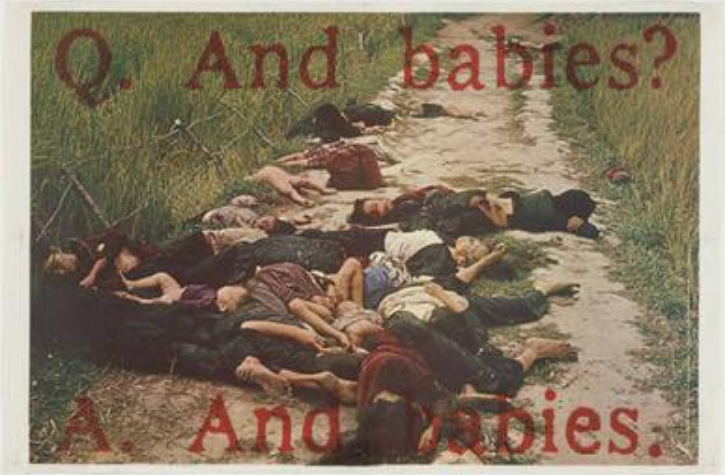

Figure 2

Pro-Calley sentiment also manifested itself through various entities within popular culture. Across the country, men and women began placing "Free Calley" bumper stickers on their vehicles as a sign of solidarity with the young lieutenant, along with calls to free prisoners of war and support American troops in Vietnam.[128] Throughout the trial, rallies were held in support of Calley; many sported buttons and lapel pins to symbolize their alliance with the lieutenant.

Of the dozens of songs written specifically about My Lai, the majority of them were in support of Calley and received substantially more airtime than their anti-Calley counterparts. In 1971, Terry Nelson, a disco-jockey with no real successes under his belt, released a single entitled "The Battle Hymn of Lt. Calley." An instant hit, the song topped off at number thirty-seven on the Billboard Top 100 and sold over 1,000,000 records in just four days.[129] In

[128] Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 555.
[129] "Lt. Calley's Battle Hymn Marches On," *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), April 3, 1971.

comparison, the number one Billboard Top 100 single of the year, “Joy to the World” by the band Three Dog Night, sold a million records in two months. In one verse, Nelson sings:

> Sir, I followed all my orders and I did the best I could
> It's hard to judge the enemy and hard to tell the good
> Yet there's not a man among us would not have understood
> We took the jungle village exactly like they said
> We responded to their rifle fire with everything we had
> And when the smoke had cleared away a hundred souls lay dead
> Sir, the soldier that's alive is the only once can fight.

These lyrics voiced the opinion of many Americans who believed that Calley was being persecuted for doing his duty to his country. It was played so often in Vietnam that the U.S. Command had to prohibit its broadcast on their radio network, fearing that it would cause controversy in the midst of the impending appeal of Calley’s conviction.[130]

With anti-war sentiment growing in the United States, many Pro-Calley songs condemned the government for the deaths at My Lai, claiming that the deaths were Washington’s fault. Big Bill Johnson’s song, “Set Lieutenant Calley Free,” called for the officer’s exoneration and “paint[ed] Calley as a Jesus-like figure: ‘We’re sick of fighting/ You’ve nailed Lieutenant Calley to a tree.’”[131] Johnson, a country singer who never acquired national fame, was an ardent Calley supporter. In his My Lai-inspired song, the country singer wrote, “What about the Americans who died in Vietnam?/ Who's the military going to charge for murdering them?/ For somebody is responsible for taking their lives,/ for unanswered prayers of brokenhearted mothers and wives.” If the government was so intent on bringing justice to the Vietnamese that died in My Lai, who were they going to prosecute to get justice for the

[130] Alvin Shuster, "U.S. Command in Vietnam Bars 'Battle Hymn of Calley' From Radio Network, Citing Pending Appeal," *New York Times*, May 1, 1971.
[131] Cori Brosnahan, "Music of My Lai," PBS, March 2018, , accessed April 17, 2018, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/my-lai-music-of-my-lai/.

thousands who gave their lives for the American effort in Vietnam? At the end of the day, many Americans felt that as long as U.S. troops were dying in Southeast Asia, soldiers should not be punished for killing whoever they deemed necessary.

Though there were considerably less songs recorded condemning Calley, they were far from nonexistent. In his ballad "Last Train to Nuremburg," folk singer Pete Seeger condemned the My Lai Massacre and all of those who were involved. According to Seeger, the fault did not simply lay with Calley, but also his superior officers, the U.S. government, and the voters who allowed their tax money to be used to fund the war in Vietnam. Seeger's invocation of Nuremberg, referring to the war crimes tribunals that took place in Germany after World War II, brought with it the comparison of American soldiers to Nazis, which was used by multiple sources in the aftermath of the killings. Seeger performed at a number of antiwar rallies, including the Vietnam Moratorium March on November 15, 1969.

The Vietnam War and the counterculture movement had a tremendous influence on a generation of American musicians that is still apparent today. As disapproval of the U.S. military's Vietnam strategy continued to rise, so did music both in dissent and support of the war effort. In December 1969, The Rolling Stones released their album *Let It Bleed* with the opening track entitled "Gimme Shelter." Though the band never references My Lai specifically, "Gimme Shelter," considered an anti-war anthem, was released less than a month after the discovery of the massacre and references rape, murder, war and children. Considered one of the best songs the Rolling Stones ever recorded, "Gimme Shelter" spoke directly to the fear Americans were experiencing for the soul of their nation; like Mick Jagger and Keith Richards, many were worried that if they did not seek shelter from Vietnam they, too, would be washed away.

This genre of antiwar music was in constant conflict with the more conservative musicians of the era, many of whom fell under the country label. In September 1969, a country singer Merle Haggard released a single "Okie from Muskogee," which he wrote to support U.S. troops in Vietnam. Though it pre-dated the public's knowledge of My Lai, Haggard's song spoke to the anger of many Americans who felt that those participating in the antiwar movement were unpatriotic liberals who had no idea what it felt like to sacrifice for their country. Looking back at his famous song in 2010, Haggard told *The Boot* magazine:

> If you use that song now, it's a really good snapshot of how dumb we were in the past. They had me fooled, too. I've become educated. I think one of the bigger mistakes politicians do is to get embarrassed when somebody catches them changing their opinion. God, what if they learned the truth since they expressed themselves in the past? I've learned the truth since I wrote that song. I play it now with a different projection. It's a different song now. I'm different now. I still believed in America then. I don't know that I do [believe] now.[132]

By the end of Vietnam, both doves and hawks felt that the war was a mistake. For many, My Lai was the moment the war was lost.

Back in Vietnam

Vietnamese response to the My Lai Massacre was not uniform throughout the North and South. Though morbid, the exposure of the events of March 16 was a huge coup for North Vietnam, as well as the Viet Cong. Those in charge of anti-American propaganda within the communist government used the killings to prove that U.S. soldiers were murderers, even tools of mass genocide let loose upon Southeast Asia. They called for immediate and total withdrawal

[132] Martin Chilton, "Merle Haggard: 'Sometimes I Wish I Hadn't Written Okie from Muskogee'," The Telegraph, April 07, 2016, accessed April 14, 2018, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/music/artists/merle-haggard-sometimes-i-wish-i-hadnt-written-okie-from-muskoge/.

of all American troops in the region. In the South, the Viet Cong used the event to inspire troops to fight even harder against U.S. oppression. Vo Cao Loi, a survivor of Bravo Company's attack on My Khe 4, "was brought before Vietcong combat units operating throughout Quang Ngai to describe what the Americans had done [to his village]."[133] This strategy to rally troops would prove to be one of the Viet Cong's most successful.

The Southern government, however, toed the party line, unwilling to anger its benefactors within the U.S. government. Once news was leaked, "the Saigon government under President Nguyen Van Thieu declared the massacre charges 'totally false' and attributed the civilian deaths to 'a normal and unavoidable act of war during a battle with the enemy.'"[134] In an interview given by Foreign Minister Tran Van Lan to Vietnamese journalist Chin Luan, the official South Vietnamese story was released: Thieu had ordered an investigation into the alleged killing and all of the accusations were false. The foreign minister instead said that after a great deal of heavy fighting between both sides (which was untrue), 125 Viet Cong and 20 civilians were killed, an unfortunate byproduct of fighting in a war.

Unwilling to allow Thieu to sweep the death of hundreds of Vietnamese under the rug, Senator Tran Van Don called for an independent investigation of My Lai by South Vietnam's Congress. Don's enquiry received extensive support from the Vietnamese press. Don, who was a former ally of Thieu during the overthrow of Premier Ngo Dinh Diem in the early 1960s, attacked the Vietnamese president, accusing him of being just another American lackey more concerned with receiving U.S. funds than the lives of his people.[135] With Don at the head of the

[133] Seymour M. Hersh, "The Scene of the Crime," The New Yorker, March 30, 2015, accessed April 14, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/03/30/the-scene-of-the-crime.
[134] Jones, *My Lai*, 228.
[135] "Foe of Thieu Sets Massacre Inquiry," *New York Times*, Nov. 26, 1969.

investigation, "the South Vietnamese Senate in Saigon approved two three-member committees to jointly inquire into the massacre."[136] Though the Vietnamese Senators had no problem condemning Thieu for his inability to protect his citizens, many showed more weariness to flat out accuse the United States of mass murder. Despite what many may have thought privately, the South knew that it needed the assistance of the United States if they wanted to remain an independent nation.

Outside Saigon, the lives of average Vietnamese people were not greatly affected by the news of the massacre. The violence faced by citizens was so vast that most had become starkly jaded, resulting in their lack of interest in the story put before them. As the issue began receiving more attention in the United States, however, the national curiosity of the Vietnamese was sparked. Catholics and Buddhists, both groups who had fled the North for fear of religious persecution, began calling for a renewed investigation into the massacre; they held rallies and protests, calling Thieu's inaction and subsequent cover-up for the Americans shameful. The Vietnamese papers covered the turmoil and controversy surrounding the trials in the United States and commended the nation for allowing open conversation about the massacre. In reality, political leaders in the United States were attempting to influence the courts martial behind closed doors, making it nearly impossible to deliver justice to the victims of My Lai.

Dirty Tricks and the My Lai Massacre

In many regards, Richard Millhouse Nixon epitomized the modern Republican's ideal American Dreamer. Nixon grew up in Yorba Linda, a poor desert outpost in Southern California where his father owned a small store after repeatedly failing his hand at citrus farming. Even

[136] Jones, *My Lai,* 228.

from a young age, Nixon was brilliant, but eternally contemptuous of those born into privilege. He worked his way through Whittier College and then Duke Law School, both of which he believed were beneath him academically. From there, Nixon joined the Navy and emerged a war hero, though he didn't do much to earn the title.[137] During his time in the service, Nixon won copious amounts of money through playing poker, the proceeds of which went into funding his first congressional campaign in 1946. Nixon went on to win that election and serve a term in the House of Representatives, then moved on to the Senate. As a young Republican with a strong anti-communist record and a large supporter base in California, Dick Nixon was chosen to be the Vice-Presidential nominee on Dwight D. Eisenhower's ticket in 1952. In 1960, Nixon would go on to run against John F. Kennedy for the highest office in the United States and lose by only 0.17% of the popular vote.[138] Richard Nixon had come within a breath of the most powerful office in the world and lost.

After a great deal of prodding by the Republican National Committee, Nixon agreed to run for governor of California against the incumbent Democrat Pat Brown. Pursuit of the office could have proven an excellent strategic move on Nixon's part, leaving him in an excellent position to run for president again in 1968 should he choose to do so. After failing to rally the far right of the Republic Party in California, the former Vice President lost to Brown 47% to 52%. Nixon sat in his campaign headquarters at the Beverley Hills Hilton, watching his political career seemingly slip away as the votes were slowly reported into media outlets. Once the election was officially called for Pat Brown, Nixon went before the press corps and committed what many

[137] Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 20-24.
[138] David Leip, "1960 Presidential General Election Results," David Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections, accessed April 10, 2018, https://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/national.php?year=1960.

considered political suicide. In his concession, he railed against the press, accusing them of never giving him fair coverage as compared to his opponents. Nixon closed his remarks with the following:

> You won't have Nixon to kick around anymore, because, gentlemen, this is my last press conference…And I hope what I have said today will at least make [the media] recognize that they have a right and responsibility if they're against a candidate to give him the shaft. But also recognize that if they give him the shaft…to put one reporter on the campaign who will report what the candidate says now and then.[139]

A week later, ABC aired a special entitled *The Political Obituary of Richard Nixon*. In the minds of America's political elite, Nixon would never be able to redeem himself in the eyes of the American people. Once again, the Washington establishment underestimated the political prowess (and ruthlessness) of Richard Nixon.

In the aftermath of the 1962 election, Nixon and his family moved to New York, where he became a senior partner at Nixon, Mudge, Rose, Guthrie & Alexander. Throughout the next five years, Nixon traveled the country campaigning for various Republicans, including Barry Goldwater in the 1964 presidential election. Slowly and silently, Nixon attempted to rebuild his political brand and shed the label of the "loser candidate." He hired public relations firms, personal consultants and surrounded himself with the best and the brightest young conservative minds in the nation. By 1967, Nixon was ready to take on whoever the Democrats put forth, whether it was LBJ or a liberal antiwar candidate.

The Presidential Election of 1968 was brutal. Civil unrest in urban centers such as Detroit, Chicago, and Newark left the public screaming for the heads of Democrats who did not seem to know how to handle law and order within the country. The decisive issue, however, was

[139] Perlstein, *Nixonland,* 61.

Vietnam. The Tet Offensive, which occurred in early 1968, "produced powerful shock waves in the United States, where many policymakers and much of the American public saw it as stark evidence that the war could not be won at a reasonable cost."[140] Johnson and the Democrats did not seem to know how the United States could successfully extricate itself from the war, so Americans turned to the Republicans for answers.

Nixon quickly grabbed the attention of voters with a series of commercials ranging from the need for law and order in the U.S. to the Vietnam War. The campaign hired Gene Jones, a Marine combat photographer turned documentary film maker, to put together the various issue ads. The short, attention-grabbing slots "would only be music and snippets from stump speeches. The images, rapid-fire collages of still photographs, told the story just as effectively with the sound off, a visual semaphore."[141] The ads would close with the words, "This Time Vote Like Your Whole World Depended On It. Nixon."[142] These highly effective commercials bolstered Nixon's platform, which ran on the idea that he was the man who would bring peace to Southeast Asia through diplomatic channels so as to spare the lives of countless American citizens. The staggering loss of Vietnamese life that was taking place was barely mentioned. In a three-way race, Nixon handily defeated Democratic nominee Hubert Humphrey, winning by a hundred votes in the electoral college and carrying the popular vote by 812,000, and George Wallace, running as an American Independent.[143] Now, it was time for President Nixon to deliver on his promises to end the war in Vietnam.

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[140] Lawrence, *The Vietnam War*, 125.
[141] Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 333.
[142] "1968 Nixon Campaign Commercial - Vietnam War," YouTube, February 26, 2012, accessed April 25, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5HBON-ZIyUE.
[143] "1968 Presidential Election," 270towin.com, accessed April 18, 2018, https://www.270towin.com/1968_Election/.

Like Johnson before him, Nixon experienced a tumultuous relationship with the anti-war movement in the United States. Stemming from middle-class college students, the antiwar movement epitomized everything that Nixon could not stand about upper middle class American society; these teenagers were flaunting their privilege and ability to receive their education while thousands of working class boys from urban and impoverished areas fought the war overseas. From the beginning of his presidency, Nixon, as well as his top advisors, strongly believed that the protestors were a major threat to his ability to negotiate a successful withdrawal while still maintaining America's dominance. In response to one national protest, Nixon said, "'It is absolutely essential that we react insurmountably and powerfully to blunt this attack.' He was talking not of hordes of well-armed NVA but of American citizens, marching unarmed through the country's academic institutions."[144]

Nixon and his top advisors were very concerned about the Vietnam Moratorium, which was scheduled to take place on November 15, 1969. Despite advice from members of his inner circle, Nixon refused to attempt to undermine the protesters by declaring his wish for peace prior to the moratorium. On November 15, "half a million people gathered on the Mall in Washington, D.C. Pete Seeger led them in singing John Lennon's new song, 'Give Peace a Chance.' Nixon let it be known that he was watching sports on TV in the White House."[145] Following in the footsteps of his predecessor, Nixon involved the FBI to investigate the various antiwar organizations, charging that the groups were engaging in "revolutionary terrorism". President

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George Wallace, the blatantly racist, pro-segregation governor from Alabama, received 46 electoral votes and almost 10 million popular votes. Wallace carried Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia. These states had historically voted Democrat but had been trending towards the Republicans since 1964.

[144] Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours,* 315.

[145] Jon Wiener, "Nixon and the 1969 Vietnam Moratorium," *The Nation*, June 29, 2015, accessed April 25, 2018, https://www.thenation.com/article/nixon-and-1969-vietnam-moratorium/.

Nixon's primary goal was to attain peace in Vietnam, but on American terms under which the military could withdraw with dignity. If the enemy saw disillusionment and impatience growing in the United States, it could embolden their resistance and lessen the United States' bargaining position. When news of the My Lai Massacre broke two days before the moratorium, this made Nixon's goal all the more difficult.[146]

The revelations of My Lai did not surface overnight. President Nixon was well into his first year in office when the allegations came to light in November 1969. The massacre took place under President Johnson's watch in March 1968. This, however, did not stop Nixon from attacking the potential public relations nightmare head on with the full force of his administration. A few weeks after Seymour Hersh published his article exposing the events at Son My, President Nixon met with a West Wing junior staffer, Alexander Butterfield, to assess the best way to contain the possible impact of the My Lai scandal. Nixon's plan was simple: go after those who were speaking out. He specifically looked to target Ron Ridenhour, the man who originally informed the federal government of My Lai, Ron Haeberle, the army photographer who was selling his photographs to national magazines, and Hugh Thompson, the pilot who helped rescue Vietnamese during the massacre and attempted to report the killings afterword. The president wanted to take the investigation into his own hands and have it handled by his own people. He ultimately handed the job off to his domestic advisor, John Ehrlichman, who in turn was tasked with recruiting various right-wing congressmen to help uncover information about the various soldiers involved in the case. Ehrlichman sent men to speak to Hersh and Ridenhour to embitter the relationship between the two, which would hopefully discredit the story itself.[147]

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[146] Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 208-209.

[147] Jones, *My Lai*, 233-234.

Nixon further entrenched himself in the My Lai scandal on December 1, when he met with senior advisors to establish what he called Task Force-My Lai. At the meeting "he direct[ed] his aides to use the necessary 'dirty tricks' and [again] discredit the army witnesses who had intrepidly refused to participate in the cover up."[148] The group established was made up of the most well-known and influential members of the administration, including Henry Kissinger, Spiro Agnew, and a myriad of others. They men were directed to discredit whatever evidence that they heard of and attempt to accentuate communist war crimes that were committed against American soldiers and Vietnamese civilians. Though many advisors suggested that it would be in Nixon's best interest to establish a commission investigating the My Lai Massacre, Nixon refused. Nixon and Kissinger both agreed that "no commission was necessary if the issue remained only My Lai. It would be another matter if news of another incident arose."[149]

These great lengths which Nixon authorized to try and contain the My Lai story, even though the fault did not rest on his administration, is very telling of the president's psyche. Author Rick Perlstein hypothesizes why exactly Richard Nixon developed this pathological need to control both the narrative and the outcome of any and all obstacles that he faced. In part, it was due to the presence of an overbearing and sometimes abusive father whom he could never fully please. Both proud of his lineage and ashamed of his lack of family status, Nixon's father remained a looming figure throughout his life. Nixon, also, experienced the loss of both his older and younger brothers, Harold and Arthur, during his formative years. Racked with survivor's guilt and a pathological need to fill the shoes left by his two brothers, Richard Nixon was

[148] Farrell, *Richard Nixon*, 370.

[149] Jones, *My Lai*, 235.

constantly striving to live up to the expectations set for him to bring the family recognition. Finally, his mother, Hannah Nixon formed the final and pivotal point upon which her son's political drive would be built upon: she loved to lie. Throughout his childhood, "the exaggerations she got away with drove home for her son the lesion that a lie unexposed does no harm, that a soul viewed as a saint can also lie."[150] This is not a complete analysis of the psyche of Richard Nixon, but it gives modern Americans a better understanding of why Richard Nixon had a tendency to pursue potential political threats to the point of self-destruction. Perlstein writes that Nixon's "ego [was] finely tuned to believe that it was nothing unless it was everything: one for which winning wasn't everything, it was the only thing —but which even victory could never fully satisfy."[151]

Richard Nixon and the Release of Rusty Calley

Throughout the trial of Lt. Calley, the White House attempted to keep its distance publicly from the scandal. During a December 8, 1969 press conference, Nixon proclaimed that America's "record of generosity, of decency, must not be allowed to be smeared and slurred because of this kind of incident." He added that he was "going to do everything [he] possibly could to see that all of the facts of this incident were brought to light and that those who [were] charged, if they [were] found guilty, were punished."[152] Behind closed doors, however, the president was a self-described "Calley advocate." According to Butterfield, the president

[150] Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 25.
[151] Ibid., 26.
[152] Ibid., 443.

confided in him that Lt. Calley was most likely a good soldier who was receiving a harsh punishment for something that should not necessarily be punished in the first place.[153]

Following Calley's conviction for the murder of over twenty Vietnamese civilians, the strategy of the White House changed dramatically. Internal polls taken by the Nixon administration revealed some interesting information that both the president and his advisors were more than willing to take advantage of: 78% of Americans disagreed with Calley's conviction and life sentence, and 79% believed that Nixon should either dramatically reduce the sentence or free the young lieutenant entirely.[154] Now, Nixon could go on the offensive.

Americans across the political spectrum opposed the presumed scapegoating of Calley. Jimmy Carter, the then-governor of Georgia, "proclaimed 'American Fighting Man's Day' and asked citizens to drive with their headlights on."[155] Mississippi governor John Bell Williams threatened to secede from the United States should the ruling against Calley be upheld. Politicians across the country, not just the South, advocated for Nixon's intervention in the verdict. Though intent to act swiftly to garner favor amongst Pro-Calley supporters, President Nixon knew that the legal ramifications of immediate and complete clemency for the lieutenant would cost far too much political capital. Instead, he made a brilliant tactical move that both showed his support for Calley while simultaneously allowing the judicial process of the American military to continue. On April 1, just days after Calley's conviction for murder, Nixon ordered the young officer to be released from the Fort Benning Stockade and held under house arrest while awaiting his appeal. In his memoir, Nixon defended this decision, reasoning that

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[153] Jones, *My Lai*, 234.
[154] Douglas O. Linder, "Survey Results," Famous Trials, accessed April 18, 2018, http://famous-trials.com/mylaicourts/1640-myl-surveyresults.
[155] Belknap, *The Vietnam War on Trial*, 192.

"justice had been served by the sentence, and that now the reality of maintaining public support for the armed services and for the war had to be given consideration."[156]

The morning of April 1, Nixon met with two of his most trusted advisors, Haldeman and Ehrlichman, to discuss the president's next step in the Calley case. According to Ehrlichman, Nixon did not believe that there was any political gain in either the government or the military in intervention with Calley's sentence. He did believe that "'an act of compassion' might not be 'a bad thing to do at [that] point,' though political considerations 'may override' other factors. There [had to] be 'a way this time to be on the side of the people.'"[157] Later that day, Nixon called Admiral Thomas Moorer, the chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and ordered him to hold Calley under house arrest. This action of leniency was unheard of within the military justice system. For example, an Air Force Colonel at the time was sent to Leavenworth for three years for simply smoking a marijuana joint.[158] Therefore, the house arrest of Lt. Calley was a straightforward nod to both the politicians and constituents who believed that the conviction was ludicrous.

After months of court appearances and deliberations in late 1971, the Military Court of Appeals upheld the conviction of murder, but significantly reduced the life sentence to twenty years of hard labor. Calley's lawyers, however, refused to accept this as the final decision and continued to pursue clemency through both the military and the executive branch of the government. Nixon had publicly stated that he would only review the Calley case once appeals processes had been carried out, so the lieutenant presented his case to the military clemency

[156] Richard M. Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), 500.
[157] Jones, *My Lai*, 293-294.
[158] Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours,* 342.

board in 1972. Going before the court on November 27, Calley's clemency petition "outlined how he had been the only soldier convicted in the My Lai Killings, and because of his confinement since the fall of 1969…Calley had served enough time, exhibiting model behavior throughout his confinement and trial."[159] The board finally ruled in May 1973 and Calley's arguments were rejected and the lieutenant remained under house arrest. In April 1974, a new Secretary of the Army, Howard Calloway, reduced Calley's twenty years to ten years and included the time the soldier had "served" since 1969, while still upholding the guilty verdict. This meant that Lt. Calley would be eligible for parole in November of that same year.[160] This sentence reduction was almost certainly organized by President Nixon. On May 3, 1974, "Nixon [privately] gave his final word on the case. Having review the record, he decided he would take no further action."[161] It would not be until the release of his memoir that Nixon would divulge this decision.[162] After all, the lieutenant was up for parole in a few months anyway.

[159] Allison, *My Lai*, 115.
[160] Ibid., 115.
[161] Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours*, 355.
[162] Richard M. Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), 500.

Chapter 4

We could come back to this country, we could be quiet, we could hold our silence, we could not tell what went on in Vietnam, but we feel because of what threatens this country, not the reds, but the crimes which we are committing that threaten it, that we have to speak out.

—John Kerry, Former Secretary of State[163]

We gotta get out of this place
If it's the last thing we ever do
We gotta get out of this place
Girl, there's a better life for me and you
Believe me baby
I know it baby
You know it too.

—The Animals[164]

What Is Historical Memory?

The history of war has often been written by its victors. Prior to the second half of the twentieth century, America had emerged victorious from every war in which it had taken part. In the wake of these successes, the United States defined itself as both the military and moral leader of the "Free World," spreading democracy and human rights across the globe, despite the glaring hypocrisy of systematic racism at home. As the victor, this American narrative was put forth and accepted by the masses. This assessment of U.S. behavior in war is not an outright fabrication; the American military has aided in the defeat of some of the most oppressive regimes in global history and a majority of those who have served proved to be brave and honorable. This concept

[163] John Kerry, "Vietnam Veterans Against the War Statement by John Kerry to the Senate Committee of Foreign Relations," The Sixties Project, accessed April 25, 2018, http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Resources/Primary/Manifestos/VVAW_Kerry_Senate.html.
[164] The Animals, "We Gotta Get Out of This Place," *Animal Tracks*, MGM Records, 1965, digital Recording.

of historical memory crafted by those in power is a culmination of viewpoints that forms a relatively uniform narrative across a group of people. According to historian Katherine Hite, this perception is "foundational to social and political identities and are also often reshaped in relation to the present historical-political moment."[165] The Vietnam War contradicted the idea that the United States has always been right and just. Professor David L. Anderson argues that Vietnam "seems to represent the rapid decline in the sense of American world hegemony and leadership and a loss of confidence in American power."[166] The historical memory of Vietnam, and particularly the My Lai Massacre, is more difficult to piece together due to the lack of perceived moral authority that the United States military had during this conflict.

The modern concept of historical memory originated from the theory of collective memory, put forth by sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in the 1930s. The collective memory of a group or a nation is the socially accepted narrative that most of those within the society stand behind as the truth. This recollection is formed by the compilation of a number of different viewpoints that people accumulate through their everyday lives. The three major theoretical contributors to collective memory are: familial, religious, and national. Each can have a different effect on the viewpoint of the individual but often unites people under a broader narrative. National memory is pivotal to historical memory because it is the nation itself that decides what is worth remembering. They dictate what information is taught in classrooms, displayed in museums and recorded in national archives, and memorialized through national holidays. In a democracy like the United States, government officials are theoretically elected to forward their

[165] Katherine Hite, "Historical Memory," ed. Bertrand Batie, Dirk Berg-Schlosser, and Leonardo Morino, International Encyclopedia of Political Science. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412959636.n251.
[166] Anderson, *Facing My Lai*, 24.

constituents' agenda, therefore shaping the national dialogue and, by extension, the national memory.[167]

As an example, America's historical memory of World War II has focused mainly on the heroism of the Greatest Generation[168] in battle and neglected some of the darker aspects of U.S. involvement overseas. The entrance of the United States into World War II and the heroic efforts of servicemen would help turn the tides of war and save millions of Jewish lives in the process. The history books, however, tend to exclude the sexual assault of French women by U.S. soldiers after the invasion of Normandy. They also omit the fact that "the Soviet Union bore the brunt of the Nazi war machine and played perhaps the most important role in the Allies' defeat of Hitler. By one calculation, for every single American soldier killed fighting the Germans, 80 Soviet soldiers died doing the same."[169] Historical memory is not necessarily false, it just tends to favor the positive while overlooking the painful or the uncomfortable.

For many young men in the 1960s, they viewed Vietnam as their generation's World War II. Most grew up listening to stories describing the heroism of their parents' generation in the 1940s and wanted to help the United States once again prevail in the face of a noble cause. A famous soldier turned anti-war activist, Ron Kovic wrote a memoir, *Born On the Fourth of July*, describing his two tours in Vietnam, the gunshot wound that left him paralyzed from the waist

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[167] Magdalena Gross, "What Is Historical Memory?" YouTube, October 28, 2016, accessed April 18, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0d4I-HgRYo.

[168] The term "the Greatest Generation" is relatively new in American historical memory. was popularized by Tom Brokaw's book, *The Greatest Generation*, in 1998, in which Brokaw wrote about the men and women who survived the Great Depression of the 1930s and went on to help defeat the Axis Powers in World War II. Brokaw believed that this generation was the greatest which any society had ever produced.

[169] Ishaan Tharoor, "Don't Forget How the Soviet Union Saved the World from Hitler," The Washington Post, May 08, 2015, accessed April 18, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/05/08/dont-forget-how-the-soviet-union-saved-the-world-from-hitler/?utm_term=.4eb1a7dcf079.

down, and his devotion to antiwar activism following his discharge from the service. When asked why Kovic had enlisted in the Marines right out of high school, he replied, "I remember thinking how much I wanted to set my own example, like my father and the fathers of our neighborhood who had fought in World War II and won a great victory. And I was determined to go back to Vietnam."[170] The preconceived notions of war that were engrained in the young men who fought in Southeast Asia were quickly dismissed upon their arrival overseas. War, as it turned out, was not nearly as glorious as they imagined.

The Vietnam War: Then and Now

The Vietnam War was a true moral crisis for Americans both at home and stationed in Southeast Asia. In the United States, men and women watched on their television screens as bombs were dropped on villages that they had never heard of while Vietnamese civilians fled in an attempt to escape the combat zones. They watched as the lottery draft numbers were called, praying that their sons would be lucky enough to not be called up. They listened to political figures time and time again promise change that never came in a war that they did not understand. The front lines were even worse; most drafted soldiers held contempt for the institution that forced them to travel to the other side of the world. After watching their fellow GIs die before their eyes, many soldiers stopped allowing themselves to care for the new recruits; they felt it was easier than losing another friend. When the news of the My Lai Massacre broke in the United States in 1969, it was the American people, not the soldiers, who were surprised by the revelation. Many wrote home to family describing heinous actions by fellow servicemen,

[170] Kitty Bennett, "Ron Kovic: Vietnam Vet's Story Told in 'Born on the Fourth of July'," AARP, December 20, 2011, accessed April 25, 2018, https://www.aarp.org/politics-society/history/info-12-2011/vietnam-vet-ron-kovic-where-are-they-now.html.

disgusted and horrified by the cruelty that war could draw out of a man. That was then. Now, few young Americans are aware of the specifics of Vietnam. Classrooms tend to focus on World War I and II, rather than U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia. For a long time, this was due to a national silence about the war in Vietnam; the nation needed time to heal from the embarrassment of defeat and the strain on the emotional fabric of the country that was caused by the war. It was glazed over, recollected only vaguely on days of remembrance and mourning. Over four decades after the fall of Saigon, there has been a steady increase in discussion regarding the Vietnam War as well as the My Lai Massacre.

In order to understand how the attitude of the American people towards the My Lai Massacre changed over the past fifty years, there must first be an understanding of the aftermath of the Vietnam War itself. Following the fall of Saigon, U.S. policymakers deeply feared an empowered Soviet Union that could use this perceived weakness of the United States to gain further control in Asia, South America, and Africa. As time progressed, however, government officials were relieved to see these fears never manifested on the world stage and infighting amongst the Asian communist countries kept other domino nations in the area to remain upright and free from communism.[171] The real effects of the Vietnam War for Americans were felt at home. Over the course of twenty years, the United States spent over $150 billion in Vietnam, which "fueled deficits that contributed to a severe economic crisis throughout the 1970s."[172] Though the economic ramifications of the war were astronomical, the bigger issue was the overwhelming sense of disillusionment felt by the American public in the years following Vietnam. In Jimmy Carter's "The Malaise Speech," the president declared:

[171] Lawrence, *The Vietnam War*, 170-171.
[172] Ibid., 171.

> For the first time in the history of our country a majority of our people believe that the next 5 years will be worse than the past 5 years. Two-thirds of our people do not even vote. The productivity of American workers is actually dropping, and the willingness of Americans to save for the future has fallen below that of all other people in the Western world.[173]

A series of polls, "reflecting the effect of the Watergate scandal and America's economic woes as well as the war, revealed dramatically lower levels of confidence in the presidency, Congress, and the military."[174]

Americans handled the immediate aftermath of the war in different ways. Some attempted to atone by electing Carter, who ran his campaign based on cleaning up the government. Others focused their anger on the Vietnamese, claiming that the communists were withholding prisoners of war who were labeled by the government as missing in action. Some, however, chose to ignore the trauma of Vietnam and act as if it never happened. This even included dismissing the men returning from war as drug addicts and murderers, leaving millions left to fend for themselves and stunting their ability to receive treatment for both physical and mental wounds they suffered during war[175].

In the latter part of the 1970s, Hollywood filmmakers attempted to address the national mood towards Vietnam through the silver screen. As the national discourse focused on the shortcomings of foreign policy in Vietnam, Hollywood began releasing major movies about the war effort. Many of the most successful and critically acclaimed war films, such as *Coming Home*, *Deer Hunter*, and *Apocalypse Now*, portrayed the conflict as futile and fruitless, reflecting

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[173] Jimmy Carter, "Jimmy Carter: Address to the Nation on Energy and National Goals:," The American Presidency Project, , accessed April 18, 2018, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=32596.
[174] Lawrence, The Vietnam War, 171-172.
[175] Ibid., 172.

the disillusioned attitude of the majority. Francis Ford Coppola's interpretation of Vietnam in *Apocalypse Now*[176] depicted a surreal, other-worldly experience that fit with what many Americans felt during their time overseas. In one of the movie's most famous scenes, "Ride of the Valkyries," Captain Benjamin Willard, played by Martin Sheen, and the men that have been assigned to help him locate and assassinate rogue Colonel Kurtz are escorted to the Nung River by Lieutenant Colonel Bill Kilgore, played by Robert Duval, in order to pursue Kurtz into Cambodia. Kilgore's unit escorts the men in a fleet of helicopters blasting Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries." When the men land on the beach, aerial support drops napalm over the surrounding jungle. While this battle wages between Viet Cong forces and the American soldiers, Kilgore bizarrely pushes Lance Johnson, a professional surfer and one of the soldiers traveling with Willard, to surf the waters off the beach that the assault is taking place on. The concurrence of the surfing and the battle happening around it, in a strange way, spoke to many veterans. For those who served in Vietnam, "the surrealism that existed in Vietnam did not result from drug-induced stupors imported from Hollywood or come from the minds of filmmakers. It grew out of the juxtaposition of conflicting realities in the conduct of war."[177]

In Coppola's two and a half hour epic war film, a scene far less well known than "Ride of the Valkyries" attempted to shed light on the needless killing that took place in Southeast Asia. "I told you don't stop" is a brief five minute scene during which the soldiers stop a small boat carrying food and a small family of Vietnamese against the wishes of Captain Willard. The U.S. soldiers scream at the people, demanding their papers and search the boat. When one of the

[176] *Apocalypse Now*, dir. Francis Ford Coppola, perf. Martin Sheen (United States: United Artists, 1979), DVD.
[177] Lawrence H. Suid, Guts & Glory: The Making of the American Military Image in Film (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 336.

soldiers goes to open a box, a teenage girl run towards him. The gunner on board the army ship opens fire and kills all the Vietnamese on board, except the girl. She was trying to protect a puppy hiding in the box. The boat's captain wants to bring the girl to a local hospital, but Willard instead shoots her point blank, telling the captain, "I told you not to stop, now let's go."[178] After the shooting subsided, one of the soldiers was visibly upset and screamed, "Let's kill all the assholes! Shoot the shit out of them!" This line, though short, speaks volumes to the mindset of American soldiers, including those who murdered the 500 civilians in My Lai. This scene, which was meant to draw parallels to the massacre, signify the complete chaos of Vietnam. Anyone could be killed over anything, even a puppy.

Others movies, like *First Blood* and *Missing in Action*, celebrated the courageous soldier figure created by Hollywood and condemned the weak government that could not get the job done.[179] *First Blood*, released in 1982, signified a surge of republicanism that was seen in the 1980s in the era of Ronald Reagan. The primary message of the movie was the condemnation of the treatment of Vietnam veterans upon their return home. Towards the end of the movie, Rambo, played by Sylvester Stalone, is approached by his old commanding officer, played by Richard Crenna, to turn himself in to the authorities after going on the run from authorities. Rambo responds:

> I did what I had to do to win, but somebody wouldn't let us win. And I come back to the world, and I see all those maggots at the airport, protesting me, calling me a baby-killer and all kinds of vile crap. Who are they to protest me, huh? Back there I could fly a gunship, I could drive a tank. I was in charge of million-dollar equipment. Back here I can't even hold a job.[180]

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[178] *Apocalypse Now*, dir. Francis Ford Coppola, perf. Martin Sheen (United States: United Artists, 1979), DVD.
[179] Lawrence, The Vietnam War, 177.
[180] First Blood, dir. Ted Kotcheff, perf. Sylvester Stalone (United States: Orion Pictures, 1982), transcript.

A blatant critique of antiwar protesters throughout the Vietnam War, this monologue delivered by Stalone struck a chord with many Americans in 1982, many of whom were searching for an America that they could once again be proud of. Though *First Blood* was meant to serve as a critique of the treatment of Veterans, *Rambo: First Blood Part II*[181] was meant to refight Vietnam in the eyes of Americans. In the 1985 film, Stalone returns to Vietnam in order to track down missing POWs who still had not returned home from war. Though the film was not received well by critics, moviegoers flocked to see it in theaters and it engrossed over $300 million. For some Americans, *Rambo II* was the end to the war they wish they could have seen.

As the U.S. entered the 1980s, the Vietnam War once again reemerged as a major topic in American politics. From 1978 to 1980, multiple governments underwent anti-American revolutions, including Nicaragua and Iran. The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 caused many to once again fear the spread of Russian communism. For the first time since the war, "American had to decide how to respond to serious challenges abroad, a dilemma that inevitably led them to reconsider all aspects of the war in Vietnam."[182] Once again, the U.S. faced the possibility of their troops being sent overseas. The country was split between those who believed it was not America's place to intervene in foreign affairs and those who thought the U.S. had to reclaim its title as the military leader of the world.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the anti-communist attitudes of the second half of the 20th century slowly began to lessen and the American government found less and less opposition to ending Vietnam's isolation from the West. In an effort to garner U.S. favor, the Vietnamese agreed to aid in the search for American remains to give peace to the families of

[181] *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, dir. George P. Cosmatos, perf. Sylvester Stalone (United States: TriStar Pictures, 1985), DVD.
[182] Lawrence, *The Vietnam War*, 173.

those still deemed missing in action. Finally, in 1994, the economic embargo on Vietnam was lifted by Washington and a huge market was opened to American investors and businessmen. The military success of the First Gulf War helped the United States shake what was known as the Vietnam Syndrome, coined by President Reagan to describe the shame and uncertainty America felt following the outcome of the Vietnam War. Relations continued to stabilize in the region and ultimately culminated in President Clinton's visit in 2000, after a trade agreement was signed by the two nations. In his remarks to the Vietnam National University, Clinton remarked,

> America is coming to see Vietnam as your people have asked for years, as a country, not a war, a country with the highest literacy rate in Southeast Asia, a country whose young people just won three gold medals at the International Math Olympiad in Seoul, a country of gifted, hard-working entrepreneurs emerging from years of conflict and uncertainty to shape a bright future.[183]

For the first time since the Vietnam War, Americans were voicing public support for the advancement of an independent Vietnam.[184]

Though the issue of supporting Vietnam may have dissipated over time, the feelings of shame and anger towards the United States' failure in Vietnam remained dormant in the back of the minds of many American citizens. After President George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq in 2003 following the September 11th attacks, there was fear amongst U.S. constituents that the government was involving America in another Vietnam with no end in sight. Many critics believed that "a duplicitous government was once again asking American troops to fight on behalf of a faraway government with little legitimacy among its own people."[185] Little did they know, this early critique would prove correct and the War in Afghanistan, which was never

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[183] William J. Clinton, "William J. Clinton: Remarks at Vietnam National University in Hanoi, Vietnam - November 17, 2000," The American Presidency Project, , accessed April 18, 2018, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=1038.
[184] Lawrence, The Vietnam War, 178-181.
[185] Ibid, 182.

officially declared by Congress, has surpassed Vietnam as the longest foreign war the United States has been involved in since its founding.

During the Obama administration, the United States further deepened its ties to Vietnam. In 2015, the White House played host to Vietnam's Communist Party leader, Nguyen Phu Trong, to discuss an increase in trade ties between the two countries. The invitation to Trong was "part of a larger strategy by [Obama's] administration to shift U.S. diplomatic attention away from traditional hot spots in the Middle East and Europe to meet China's rise in Asia."[186] Many Americans were not pleased with Obama's decision due to Vietnam's less than desirable free speech record and its tendency to jail political dissidents. In a joint press conference the day Trong arrived in the United States, President Obama announced that the U.S. would be lifting the arms embargo that had been in place since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. In his remarks, the president made it clear that "the United States and Vietnam share a mutual concern over China's provocations in the region, and he reiterated a previous pledge that the United States would "continue to fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows." [187]

Though Americans have generally accepted the Vietnamese as a trade partner and regional ally, they will never forget the deeply seeded derision which the war brought to the

[186] David Nakamura, "Obama Working to Make Vietnam an Ally in Dealing with China's Rise," The Washington Post, July 06, 2015, , accessed April 23, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/obama-working-to-make-vietnam-an-ally-in-dealing-with-chinas-rise/2015/07/06/75838cd8-23e7-11e5-aae2-6c4f59b050aa_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.7bafa04cee5f.

[187] David Nakamura, "In Historic Move, U.S. Lifts Embargo on Arms Sales to Vietnam," The Washington Post, May 23, 2016, , accessed April 23, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2016/05/23/in-historic-move-u-s-lifts-arms-sales-embargo-to-vietnam/?utm_term=.18c504762d18.

home front during the 1960s and 1970s, nor will they be able to ever fully put the fear of military failure behind them.

Moving Past My Lai

In 1969 and 1970, the My Lai Massacre dominated the global news cycle. Every American watched as Lt. Calley was indicted for the murder of over 100 civilians. They held their breath as he was found guilty of murdering twenty Vietnamese noncombatants and a majority replied with rage when he was sentenced to life in prison. The Americans in contemporary society who are aware of these events have looked back at this crass reaction by their predecessors with disgust, unsure how anyone could support a man convicted of murdering innocent people. For 1970s citizens, however, the issue was anything but black and white. The late 1960s and early 1970s remain one of the most turbulent times in American history. In the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, race riots, and the assassinations of many national symbols of hope, such as Martin Luther King Jr. and John F. Kennedy, there was no clear hero to unite the country behind. In 1970 America, an angry and terrified public decided that that hero could be Lt. William Calley.

By modern standards, the reaction of the American public may seem to many as heartless and even deplorable. During Lt. Calley's trial, the international media was baffled by the United States' defense of a man who had been accused of murdering over a hundred people. As discussed in Chapter Three, Calley was viewed as a scapegoat by both the conservatives and the liberals, being blamed for an event that ultimately was the fault of the chain of command. Though it is hard not to judge those living through this era for what seems like a lack of empathy for the Vietnamese people, there were many factors in play that hindsight may not necessarily

account for. During Calley's trial, the coverage reported in newspapers was not nearly as graphic as the actual testimony being given. Reporters whitewashed the evidence against the lieutenant in order to make it more palatable for the American people. Headlines continuously read of acquittals of other members of Charlie Company and sympathetic editorials called the investigations into the events of the massacre a witch hunt. The national narrative was determined to protect the men of Charlie Company who Americans believed were only doing their duty.

Though the early 1970s saw a great deal of support for the men of Charlie Company, many still voiced questions of how and why exactly the My Lai Massacre took place. In 1971, a short documentary by Joseph Strick was released to the public. Entitled *Interviews with My Lai Veterans*, the twenty-minute film featured interviews with five men who served in Charlie Company in March of 1968. At the 43rd Academy Awards in 1971, Strick's project won for Best Documentary (Short Subject). The men that starred in the documentary were from all walks of life, raised in good homes across the country. The soldiers gave specific details about their experiences in the war, violence that they witnessed while on duty, and rapes and murders that the men of their unit had taken part in. As haunting as the testimony that these men put forth was, there did not seem to be any remorse for the people who died in Son My. Instead, viewers felt the fear that the men experienced in the face of booby traps, uncertain who was going to die on a daily basis and the psychological toll that it took on them. The idea of institutional failure and the soldiers' duty to follow orders was stressed throughout the film. The men felt for those who died, but ardently defended the fact that they were only following orders; the events of March 16 were not their fault. There was also little mention of the depth of the cover up and

investigations that took place in the wake of My Lai. There were no accounts from any Vietnamese.[188]

This narrative of American helplessness in the face of a crippling system continued throughout the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, when it was even discussed at all. For the most part, the United States wanted to move on from the tragedy that had embarrassed the country in 1970 and 1971. Americans yearned for a sense of normalcy in a world that they scarcely recognized as their own. The remainder of the 1970s consisted of the public narrative following the direction of those in power. In a Los Angeles Times article, *My Lai Chain of Command: 6 Years Later*, reporter Richard Meyer described how the chain of command above Lt. Calley were fairing in 1974. Meyer talked about the setbacks experienced by the officers in their military careers, like Koster losing one of his stars following the incident. The article highlighted the social suffering of numerous men in positions of power within Charlie Company and the Americal Division, but barely mentions the Vietnamese who died on March 16. In a brief four sentences at the end of the article, Meyer talked about the fact that no one knows where the remains of the My Lai victims are, but a majority of the survivors still lived in the area. The village itself, Meyer said, was paved over with cement with little or no development. Once again, a substantive update on the lives of the Vietnamese was not included.[189]

Following the fall of Saigon and the rise of a united communist Vietnam, some claimed that My Lai was doing well in the aftermath of the massacre. An article released in October of 1976 by the Soviet Union via Reuters, just one month before Meyer's article, claimed that the

[188] Interviews with My Lai Veterans, dir. Joseph Strick, by Joseph Strick, perf. Richard Hammer (United States: New Yorker Films, 1971).
[189] Richard E. Meyer, "My Lai Chain of Command: 6 Years Later," Los Angeles Times, November 24, 1974, Part V, accessed March 20, 2018.

village had been rebuilt and funded by the new Vietnamese government.[190] In reality, the majority of the village at that point had still yet to be rebuilt and most of the survivors had relocated to either refugee camps or nearby villages.

My Lai was a jarring experience for American citizens. The idea that the United States may not be the right and just moral leader of the world shook many to their cores, resulting in a lack of empathy for the victims of My Lai. It was for this reason that the general public was unwilling to truly discuss the events of March 16 and the carnage until the mid-1980s. With the scars of Vietnam slowly dissipating in the forefront of the American psyche, some began to take a second look at the My Lai Massacre and those who were responsible for the events that took place.

In 1985, George Esper, an American journalist working for the Associated Press, wrote an article about the My Lai Massacre seventeen years after it took place. Versions of the article were printed in newspapers across the country, including the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Seattle Times*, and *The Boston Globe*. Instead of the typical defense or excuses made by the men who took part in the massacre, Esper wrote from the point of view of the Vietnamese who continued to live in the aftermath of the slaughter. “Like the Vietnam War itself, the My Lai massacre is fading in American memory. But in My Lai it remains an ever-present nightmare”[191]. In the fourteen-hundred-word article, the journalist interviewed Vietnamese survivors and their experiences with grief and anger towards the Americans who killed five hundred of their neighbors. Esper conveys the pain and heartache of those who watched their family members

[190] "My Lai Flourishing, Russ Say," Los Angeles Times, October 12, 1976, Part I sec.

[191] George Esper, "Scars From My Lai After 16 Years," The Seattle Times, January 6, 1985: A2, NewsBank, http://infoweb.newsbank.com.libezproxy2.syr.edu/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/0EB5311B0F2DBD26.

slaughtered before their very eyes, and spared no details. Though this is not the first article to do so, this article exemplifies the broadening of the conversation about My Lai within American society.

On May 23, 1989, over twenty-one years after the events at Son My took place, the American people sat down at their television sets, as they did most Tuesday nights, and turned on the new episode of *Frontline*, a documentary series on PBS that has been on the air since 1983. Just as many other nights, Judy Woodruff appeared on the screen introducing the topic of that night's documentary. On this particular Tuesday, Woodward began the broadcast with the following:

> Tonight, *Frontline* offers a disturbing, surprising and profound film, that, for the first time, examines the darkest chapter of the Vietnam War ... through the memories of American soldiers and Vietnamese villagers who were in My Lai that savage day more than twenty years ago.[192]

For the first time on a nationally televised broadcast, My Lai was discussed and a forum was created to describe both the American and Vietnamese perspective on the events that took place in 1968.

The men who produced the special, Kevin Sims and Michael Bilton, were British citizens who originally created the documentary for England's Yorkshire Television and entitled it *Four Hours in My Lai*. The two men partnered with PBS to release the documentary in the United States and won an International Emmy Award for Best Documentary. For a majority of the American audience, this was not the first time they had heard accounts of My Lai from the men of Charlie Company, but to the United States as a whole, this was the first time that any of them

[192] "Remember My Lai," PBS, accessed April 18, 2018, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh//pages/frontline/programs/transcripts/714.html

were seeing survivors of the atrocity. A local woman named Truong Thi Le survived the massacre by hiding in the rice paddies on the outskirts of the village. When asked about what she witnessed, she told filmmakers, "For a while I didn't hear any noise. I was alive because there were corpses on top of me. I lifted my head and saw Americans here and there incessantly. Those who were still alive were shot again and again. Then there was no more."[193] This broadcast opened an entirely new American dialogue about the My Lai Massacre and the Vietnam War. The essence of the idea was to acknowledge the wrongdoing and move forward as a country. Though this documentary was a step in the right direction, it failed to mention the depth of the cover up of the massacre and the lengths to which the American military and government went to keep it concealed. The world, it seemed, was not ready to acknowledge that quite yet.

Though remembrance and acknowledgement of wrongdoing in Vietnam continued to grow as America entered the 1990s, many felt as if the progress was not enough. On the twenty-fifth anniversary of the My Lai Massacre, the *Las Vegas Review* published a piece by David Branco entitled, "25 years later, Who Remembers My Lai?" In the article, Branco briefly recounts the events of the massacre, but focuses on the fact that, for the most part, the atrocity that occurred in Son My, as well as many other questionable aspects of the Vietnam War, were still not being discussed. The reporter laments, "For people in their 30s and younger, the words 'My Lai' mean nothing. Those old enough to remember My Lai prefer to forget it." He goes on to say, "In the United States, Vietnam veterans hold this knowledge, but talk about it mostly

[193] "Remember My Lai [Part 1 of 2]," YouTube, March 28, 2014, , accessed April 18, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QcDa5IIFSMQ.

among themselves. Textbooks give the war little space; My Lai rarely even is mentioned."[194] Though there was progress being made, the Gulf War in the Middle East brought the issue to the forefront of the national discourse. Should America intervene? Were U.S. military forces properly trained to handle non-combatants in light of their previous record? Toward the end of his article, Branco speaks directly to these concerns:

> Consider that veterans counselors now are encountering increasing numbers of Persian Gulf War veterans seeking help for feelings of guilt and other problems associated with their having shot fleeing Iraqi soldiers in the back, or with having committed "mercy killings" of prisoners, or with having pushed buttons that resulted in numerous civilian deaths. Perhaps knowledge of My Lai would have prevented those horrible experiences.[195]

By the early 1990s, the United States had made great strides to coming to terms with the Vietnam War, but there was still a long way to go.

The mid-1990s brought with it economic prosperity and increased globalization under President Bill Clinton, who sought to create a strong global network following the fall of the Soviet Union. As was mentioned previously, Clinton's administration reestablished diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Vietnam, first by lifting the economic embargo in 1994 and then establishing a trade treaty in 2000. As relations between the two countries stabilized in the latter part of the decade, the flow of information between them increased exponentially. With Vietnam once again in American headlines, the topic of the war was also brought to the forefront.

On March 6, 1998, the United States Army awarded the Soldier's Medal[196] to Hugh Thompson, Larry Colburn, and Glenn Andreotta, the three soldiers who were responsible for

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[194] David Branco, "25 Years Later, Who Remembers My Lai?" Las Vegas Review, March 17, 1993.

[195] Ibid.

[196] The Soldier's Medal is the highest award for life-saving bravery that a soldier can receive not involving contact with an enemy.

bringing the violence of the My Lai Massacre to an end. By doing so, the military acknowledged one of the darkest days in their own history. Upon accepting his medal, Larry Colburn told those in attendance of the ceremony, "It is my solemn wish that we all never forget the tragedy and brutality of war. I would like to quote General Douglas MacArthur: `The soldier, be he friend or foe, is charged with the protection of the weak and the unarmed. It is his very existence for being.'"[197] Institutions as vast and powerful as the United States Army rarely acknowledge their mistakes publicly, especially within the lifetimes of those that were wronged. On that day in 1998, however, that is exactly what happened.

Shortly after the Colburn and Thompson received their medals (Andreotta died in Vietnam and his was awarded posthumously), the two men returned to My Lai with *60 Minutes* correspondent Mike Wallace, who originally interviewed Paul Meadlo when the story of My Lai first broke. Speaking with survivors of the massacre, Thompson apologized on behalf of his fellow servicemen. When asked why he did not take part in the killings that day, the retired helicopter pilot said, "I saved the people because I wasn't taught to murder and kill. I can't answer for the people who took part in it. I apologize for the ones that did. I just wished we could have helped more people that day."[198] The two men spoke about their mistreatment by both the U.S. Army and Congress after they continued to tell the truth about what happened in Son My. The interview was honest and raw, portraying the first steps towards a finite future for American-Vietnamese relations, as well as forgiveness.

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[197] John Aloysius Farrell and Globe Staff, "Army Honors Two Heroes Of My Lai, Two Who Halted My Lai Killings Honored," The Boston Globe (Boston, MA), March 7, 1998, Accessed April 4, 2018.

[198] "Return To My Lai," CBS News, December 13, 1999, Accessed April 03, 2018, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/return-to-my-lai/

Modern My Lais

In 2001, most Americans' lives were split into two distinct periods: before the September 11th Attacks and after. At the very least, almost every person that was old enough to remember the act of terrorism could recite exactly where they were and what they were doing the moment the planes hit the Twin Towers. In the aftermath of the attack, Americans lashed out in terror and anger, calling upon their government to take swift action against those who had attacked them on American soil. In October 2001, President George W. Bush ordered troops overseas, beginning the War in Afghanistan, which would prove to be the longest war in U.S. history. From the beginning of America's invasion in the Middle East, many people drew comparisons between the War in Afghanistan, and eventually Iraq, to the War in Vietnam thirty years earlier. Neither conflict was ever declared a war by Congress and the United States, once again, was involving itself in an area of the world it did not understand with few allies in the region. Unfortunately, another similarity that would be drawn between the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and Vietnam would be the mistreatment of prisoners and noncombatants at the hands of American troops.

When the U.S. invaded Iraq in 2003, the military seized a variety of assets from the Iraqi government. Of the facilities they claimed, one was a prison about twenty miles outside of Baghdad named Abu Ghraib. From the time the United States seized the prison, detainees were subjected to physical, sexual, and mental torture and kept in abhorrent conditions. Iraqi men and women were raped and forced to masturbate in front of female guards. Prisoners were water-boarded and threatened with attack dogs.[199] In Abu Ghraib,

> inadequacies of troop preparation, a permissive culture of command, shifting lines of authority, as well as the apparent exclusion of judge advocates from oversight of interrogation practices combined to produce not just multiple instance of prisoner abuse

[199] Seymour M. Hersh, "Torture at Abu Ghraib," The New Yorker, May 10, 2004, Accessed April 05, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/05/10/torture-at-abu-ghraib.

> but also probably the worst crisis of moral legitimacy that the army had experienced since the massacre at My Lai (4).[200]

Though the civilians who were killed in the My Lai Massacre were not tortured in the same way that the prisoners of Abu Ghraib were, many drew similarities between the two events, mostly based on the pure cruelty displayed by the American soldiers. This was compounded by accusations that officers and those within the chain of command were aware of the mistreatment of prisoners; in a letter home to his family, Staff Sergeant Ivan L. Frederick II wrote, "The military-intelligence officers have encouraged and told us, 'Great job,' they were now getting positive results and information… CID has been present when the military working dogs were used to intimidate prisoners at MI's request."[201] The reporter that first broke the story of My Lai in the American press, Seymour Hersh, pursued the story of Abu Ghraib from the moment it was released on *60 Minutes* for national consumption. In an interview with the *New York Times* describing his impact on investigative journalism, Hersh asserted, "'My Lai and Vietnam was a technical problem… America was not jeopardized. This story represents a very important strategic loss, not something that can be fixed by setting up an embassy and giving people some breaks on trade."[202] For the American people, the revelations of Abu Ghraib were shocking; once again, they were faced with horrible actions of American men and women that seemed too cruel to believe. The United States military had not made the progress many thought it had.

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[200] Oliver, *The My Lai*, 250-251.

[201] Hersh, "Torture at Abu Ghraib."

[202] David Carr, "Dogged Reporter's Impact, From My Lai to Abu Ghraib," The New York Times, May 20, 2004, Accessed April 05, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/20/arts/dogged-reporter-s-impact-from-my-lai-to-abu-ghraib.html.

About a year after Abu Ghraib was exposed to the public, the U.S. army found itself faced with yet another public relations nightmare in Iraq. The official story was that an army unit patrolling Haditha, a small town in the Euphrates Valley, ran over a live IED that left one soldier dead; "15 Iraqi civilians were killed by the same bomb that killed the marine, and…another eight victims were 'gunmen.'"[203] In reality, the Iraqis were discovered dead in their homes, unarmed. The marines involved originally tried to cover up the deaths by paying off the families of those who were killed, but the story eventually broke, as it always does. At this point in 2006, Americans were already drawing heavy comparisons between the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to that of Vietnam. Once the killings at Haditha were revealed to the public, newspapers and journalists immediately began referring to the event as "the Iraqi My Lai." Once again, Americans were forced to face a past that seemed to be much to relevant to the present.

The similarities between the My Lai Massacre and the Haditha killings are striking. The most obvious similarities are the following: Americans killed unarmed civilians after storming their homes in the wake of losing a comrade in arms and then they tried to cover it up. However, there are a number of differences between the two. The My Lai Massacre resulted in the death of 500 civilians, whereas Haditha resulted in 23; every civilian life is important to save, but the numbers are incomparable. The events at Haditha "shine[d] a cruel light on the gap between the stated point of staying in Iraq—the bestowal and consolidation of freedom—and the grim reality, in which American soldiers [were] often feared and hated, and came in turn to see all Iraqis as enemies."[204] Many in the United States, who were already losing faith in the war effort, became

[203] "The Massacre in Haditha." The Economist. June 03, 2006. Accessed April 05, 2018. https://www.economist.com/node/7006286.

[204] Ibid.

more and more aware of America's lack of progress in the Middle East. When asked about whether he thought that Haditha and My Lai shared commonalities, Seymour Hersh said, "Both are examples of what can happen when American soldiers are surrounded by a culture they don't understand. They come to see everything and everyone around them as threatening."[205] For many Americans, Haditha affirmed the idea that the United States had once again involved itself in another Vietnam.

My Lai Today

As the United States commemorates the fiftieth anniversaries of both My Lai and the Vietnam War, there once again lingers the collective disillusionment that a country experiences when they no longer believe in what they are fighting for. In the face of war in the Middle East, racial unrest at home, and political upheaval in the age of Trump, there exists a general uneasiness that has engulfed the nation. Americans find themselves asking why their government continues to send men and funds overseas to fight in wars that no one understands. In response to this rise in sentiment, there began an uptick in the discussion of the Vietnam War and its modern legacy. In the recent years, a number of articles, documentaries, and various works about Vietnam have been written by journalists and historians in an attempt to explain the political and social climate of the United States during the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. For the first time since the Vietnam War, Americans were looking to their past to try to gain an understanding of the present and move toward the future. In a twist of fate, this movement also coincides with the fiftieth anniversary of the Vietnam War, as well as the My Lai Massacre. In the last decade, a

[205] Daniel Schorr, "My Lai Anniversary at Time to Reconsider Iraq," NPR, March 16, 2008, Accessed April 05, 2018, https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=88325832.

great deal has been done to commemorate both events and bring acceptance to the people of the United States.

In 2014, the U.S. Congress funded a $63 million Pentagon project to compile an accurate account of what happened during the Vietnam War. Its primary tasks were to put together a precise and unbiased timeline of the events of the war, as well as locate and honor millions of Vietnam veterans who many feel have not received adequate recognition for their service to their country. Though a noble cause to undertake, many feared that the Pentagon could potentially rewrite history in their favor. In order to counteract this fear, a group of citizens formed the Vietnam Peace Commemoration Committee to share the real story of Vietnam. Since its founding, the committee's primary goal has been "to look back at the most unpopular war in American history, and the powerful movement that worked to stop it, both to ensure that the truth is told and that the lessons learned are shared in order to avoid becoming entangled in similar disastrous interventions."[206] The VPCC has put together countless events including rallies, speakers, and viewings of Vietnam-inspired movies and documentaries, all with the hope of opening the American people to a dialogue of acceptance and knowledge about one of the most polarizing eras in U.S. history.

Though efforts to commemorate the war began in 2015, the fiftieth anniversary of the My Lai Massacre actually took place in 2018. From March 15 to the 18, members of VPCC hosted a variety of events in Washington D.C. in order to remember those who lost their lives at My Lai, and to raise awareness so that such an atrocity would not happen again. The group scheduled talks with Howard Jones, a My Lai expert and well-known author, as well as a viewing of the

[206] "About VPCC," Vietnam Peace Commemoration Committee - On the 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War, Accessed April 05, 2018, http://www.vietnampeace.org/about-vpcc.

documentary *Winter Soldier*, a film about the public inquiry into war crimes committed by American forces in Vietnam that was held in Detroit in 1971. The primary ceremony to honor the massacre, however, took place on March 16 in Lafayette Square across the street from the White House in Washington D.C. The vigil was attended by speakers ranging from clergy to activists to professors. When organizing the event, VPCC had four primary goals:

> to acknowledge moral responsibility for crimes of war committed in our name; end military strategies that target civilians with anti-personnel weapons and drone strikes; demand adequate U.S. government aid to clean up Agent Orange, land mines, and unexploded ordnance still claiming lives in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia; and seek the release of all government sequestered evidence of additional criminal actions committed by U.S. forces in Indochina, Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere.[207]

The men and women that attended the event did not do so because they believed that the world would change overnight. Rather, they believed that in order for the United States to live up to the role that it has created for itself as the moral leader of the world, it must acknowledge and remember the mistakes that it has made in the past. In a public appeal for moral responsibility on their website, the committee called for nationwide vigils for the victims as well as better educational programs so that students can learn and understand what exactly happened in Vietnam fifty years ago. Though their voices may not be many, they are doing their American duty to represent those who cannot represent themselves.

Scholars have been conducting research on Vietnam since the war ended. There have been countless books and articles written about this period in American history, a plethora of information available to anyone who wishes to seek it out. The real issue is presenting this information in a way that will interest the general public and keep them engaged with the

[207] "My Lai 50th Events," Vietnam Peace Commemoration Committee - On the 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War, Accessed April 05, 2018, http://www.vietnampeace.org/my-lai.

material. After ten years and $30 million, filmmakers Lynn Novak and Ken Burns attempted to do just that. In September 2017, PBS aired the two men's ten-part documentary series simply titled *The Vietnam War*. With over 17 hours of content, the episodes span the era of French colonialism in Southeast Asia all the way to how both Americans and Vietnamese handled post-war fears and frustrations. Each individual episode is a story in and of itself, each searching for its own truth. In a pre-release *Vanity Fair* article reviewing the docu-series, journalist David Kamp praised the undertaking of *The Vietnam War*, remarking that most previous work on the subject "prompted agonized debate and begat a kind of reckoning fatigue, a feeling of *O.K., O.K., we get it: The Vietnam War messed people up and divided our nation and is a stain on our history—let's drop the subject.*"[208] Burns and Novak, however, did not set out to deliver the same admonishing account of American intervention in Vietnam, but rather tell the whole story and hopefully bring people some peace in the process. *The Vietnam War* covered the pivotal moments of the conflict that engulfed twenty years of American foreign policy, the good, the bad, and the ugly.

The My Lai Massacre was discussed in episode eight, "The History of the World (April 1969-May 1970)."[209] During the second half of the episode, Burns describes in depth the rape and murder of 500 Vietnamese noncombatants and the subsequent cover-up that occurred within the highest ranks of the U.S. government. The program conveyed the blunt truth about the brutality of American actions at My Lai, but also expressed the fear that the soldiers felt while

[208] David Kamp, "Why The Vietnam War Is Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's Most Ambitious Project Yet," Vanity Fair, July 25, 2017, Accessed April 06, 2018, https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/07/the-vietnam-war-ken-burns-lynn-novicks-documentary.

[209] Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, dirs., "The History of the World (April 1969-May 1970)," in *The Vietnam War*, PBS, September 26, 2017.

patrolling the area. Instead of placing the blame heavily upon the GIs, which often occurs, the documentary seems to rest the incident at the feet of the military chain of command and those within the government who tried to downplay the incident after the fact. Whether or not one agrees with this assessment of the events that took place in the aftermath of the My Lai Massacre, Burns and Novick helped spark various conversations about the Vietnam War and My Lai that had largely been silenced in the past.

Though there was a great deal of critical support for the documentaries in general, some experts and historians were not nearly as complimentary. One of the advisors that worked on the project with Burns and Novick was retired General Merril McPeak of the U.S. Army. During the writing phase, McPeak took issue with some script changes made by Burns, predominantly in his description of the deaths of civilians in My Lai. Originally, "in a section about the massacre … 'murder' became 'killing.' (The final script: 'The killing of civilians has happened in every war.') McPeak pressed for 'murder.'"[210] Burns, however, stuck to his revision, citing that the use of the word would be inflammatory and counterproductive to the objective of unification that he was attempting to achieve. For Terry Provance, a member of the VPCC and orchestrator of the My Lai Vigil, this objective is what hurt the film most. In an interview, Provance conceded that *The Vietnam War* was entertaining, but it also glossed over major issues that remain unaddressed in American society about Vietnam. "The United States has created a deliberate amnesia about Vietnam," the anti-war activist said. He surmised that this is the reason that many students at all academic levels rarely learn about the conflict.[211] For many with previous knowledge of

[210] Ian Parker, "Ken Burns's American Canon," The New Yorker, August 29, 2017, Accessed April 06, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/09/04/ken-burns-american-canon.

[211] Terry Provance, Telephone interview by Dana M. Lechleiter, April 6, 2018.

Vietnam, *The Vietnam War* seemed to be an attempt at placating all members of the conflict. Burns attempted to tell the stories of the everyday citizen's experience with Vietnam, glorifying soldiers while still attempting to appease members of the anti-war movement. In their search for unification, critics argue, Burns and Novick highlighted the vast gaps between those still struggling with the aftermath of Vietnam today, causing a greater divide. In Burns and Novick's attempt to placate everyone, they subtly enforced the idea that U.S. troops do not murder; it's just not the American way.

The release of *The Vietnam War* served as an excellent precursor to the fiftieth anniversary of the My Lai Massacre, which took place on March 16, 2018. Fifty years after the senseless deaths of those 504 Vietnamese civilians, many looked back upon the events of March 16 and attempted to educate the public on the horrific event. Numerous op-eds and articles were written by people attempting to make sense of how My Lai fit into America's past, present, and future. Most of the pieces honor of the victims who died and remember the men that helped put an end to the violence on that day, but some also have a distorted view of My Lai's presence in both America's history and its historical memory. The *Los Angeles Times*'s Jon Wiener, for example, opened his remembrance article by saying, "Everybody's heard of the My Lai massacre."[212] This, unfortunately, is not true. Unless a person lived through the Vietnam War or heard stories from those who served, there is a very good chance that My Lai, and the war at large, was not included in their studies. This, of course, is not true of everyone, but the likelihood of My Lai being more than a footnote in a textbook for most Americans is very low.

[212] Jon Wiener, "A Forgotten Hero Stopped the My Lai Massacre 50 Years Ago Today," Los Angeles Times, March 16, 2018, Accessed April 07, 2018, http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-wiener-my-lai-hugh-thompson-20180316-story.html.

Wiener's article centered around honoring the late Hugh Thompson, who, without a doubt, deserves the label of hero for his actions on that day in March 1968. Thompson, who saved innocent Vietnamese and carried them to safety, exemplifies what an American soldier should be, but Wiener takes this a step further. The journalist concedes that Americans senselessly murdered 500 people in 1968 in a matter of four hours, but he also points out the Hugh Thompson was also an American. His argument, though not overtly stated, was that not all American soldiers were murderers or rapists, an American was the one who stopped My Lai; Americans are inherently good people. The idea that the William Calley's of various military units were just bad eggs in a largely just system is not correct. William Calley was able to murder over 100 Vietnamese noncombatants and face little consequences because a systematic decision within the chain of command allowed it to be so. My Lai was not an issue of a few bad Americans giving the U.S. military a bad reputation. If it were, instances like Abu Ghraib and the Haditha killings would not have occurred either. Describing My Lai as the wrongdoing of a few wayward Americans has become a part of the historical memory of the event held by those who still remember it fifty years later because it is easier to believe than the fact that war can corrupt anyone, even Americans.

On the anniversary, others voiced a more critical view of the United States fifty years after the massacre. Conor Friedersdorf, a staff writer for *The Atlantic*, wrote an article that condemned the Americans that took part in the massacre, but placed a majority of the blame for war crimes on governments who enter into a war by choice, not as a last resort. He condemned Americans in the early 1970s and beyond who held up Calley as a hero and treated Hugh Thompson as if he were a traitor to the military and his country. Fridersdorf reasoned that "a country can minimize the evil perpetrated in its name, by its soldiers, by going to war only as a

last resort; maintaining discipline as best as is humanly possible during armed conflict; holding war criminals responsible for their deeds; and treating those who stop or uncover crimes against humanity as heroes rather than villains."[213] Though this view may be more negative than Weiner's, it is more realistic. The "Vietnam Syndrome" that existed in the United States in the years after the war has begun to set in in the wake of the War in Iraq and the ongoing War in Afghanistan. War crimes occurred in both of these conflicts, just like Vietnam. American citizens must remember these incidents, no matter the pain it brings to the national identity; if the United States ignores its past, there will continue to be many more My Lais.

[213]Conor Friedersdorf, "The Unlearned Lesson of My Lai," The Atlantic, March 16, 2018, Accessed April 07, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/03/my-lai-50/555671/.

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