**The My Lai Massacre**

**Kendrick Oliver revisits the scene of a crime that became a watershed in public perceptions of the Vietnam war.**

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**Aftermath of the My Lai massacre, March 16, 1968**On the morning of March 16th, 1968, the men of Charlie Company, 11th Light Infantry Brigade, Americal Division, US Army, entered the hamlet of Tu Cung, in the village of Son My, on the coast of central Vietnam. The company was assigned to a temporary battalion-sized unit named Task Force Barker, and it was led by Captain Ernest Medina. In charge of the company’s 1st Platoon was Lieutenant William Calley. Inside Tu Cung the company encountered no enemy forces, no opposing fire of any kind. Its only casualty was self-inflicted. Nevertheless, by early afternoon, well over 300 residents of the hamlet lay dead. Those killed were predominantly women, old men or small children. A number of the women had been raped before being killed. Other victims had been tortured and mutilated, then killed. Much of the killing, though not all, had occurred in the sub-hamlet of Xom Lang, known to the Americans as My Lai 4. Much of the killing, though not all, had been conducted by 1st Platoon. That same morning, a mile or so away, another Task Force Barker unit, Bravo Company, killed close to a hundred civilians in the sub-hamlet of My Hoi, Co Luy hamlet, known to the Americans as My Khe 4.

Initially covered-up by the local divisional command, the events in Son My only came to the attention of the army authorities in April 1969, after a young GI who had served in the 11th Brigade wrote a letter to the President, the Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and several congressmen and senators describing what he had been told about the killings by some of the soldiers involved. Eight months later, in November, knowledge of the massacre finally entered the public domain when the investigative reporter Seymour Hersh revealed that William Calley had been charged with the murder of 109 Vietnamese civilians.

From that moment on, through to the conclusion of Calley’s court martial in spring 1971, what became known as the My Lai massacre (the killings in My Khe 4 were largely ignored) remained a prominent item in American national discourse. According to a survey commissioned by the Nixon White House, the level of public awareness of the ‘guilty’ verdict handed down in the Calley trial was 96 per cent: ‘the highest we’ve gotten on any subject in any of our polls,’ commented Chief of Staff Bob Haldeman. The case even produced its own hit single, ‘The Battle Hymn of Lieutenant Calley’ by Terry Nelson and ‘C’ Company, which reached number 37 on the Billboard chart. Commentators, meanwhile, were rarely inclined to understate the massacre’s historical significance. As evidence about the crimes committed in My Lai 4 began to emerge in the wake of Hersh’s revelations, a *New York Times* editorial declared that the atrocities ‘may turn out to have been one of this nation’s most ignoble hours’. In April 1971, *Time* magazine asserted that ‘the crisis of confidence caused by the Calley affair is a graver phenomenon than the horror following the assassination of President Kennedy. Historically, it is far more crucial.’ In these renderings, the My Lai massacre was a pivotal event, not just in the history of the Vietnam War but also in that of the American nation as a whole.

Nearly forty years on, however, the status of the massacre as historical pivot is unclear, not so much because it is explicitly contested, but because its memory is muted. The media has revisited the story of the massacre on most of its major anniversaries, or when fresh revelations of atrocities in past or current conflicts have stimulated a search for analogies or precedents. Public interest in the case has been reawakened on occasion by more extensive treatments, as in 1989 when the British television documentary *Four Hours in My Lai* was broadcast on the American PBS network, or in 1994 when the award-winning writer Tim O’Brien – himself a Vietnam veteran – published a novel, *In the Lake of the Woods*, the central character of which had been involved in the massacre. However, these were intermittent and usually partial reawakenings: they have not been enough to make the massacre an iconic moment within the national memory, of the kind that each generation seeks to instill knowledge of in the next. The grave ‘crisis of confidence’ identified by *Time* in 1971, if it occurred, quite quickly became difficult to trace within American culture. In 1983, Robert Muller, founder of the Vietnam Veterans of America, embarked on a speaking tour of US colleges: ‘I swear, the first college I went to, they asked, “What’s My Lai, and who is Lieutenant Calley?”’ A decade later, in 1994, Tim O’Brien recalled much the same experience: ‘In the colleges and high schools I sometimes visit, the mention of My Lai brings on null stares, a sort of puzzlement, disbelief mixed with utter ignorance.’

The silence that generally surrounds the massacre in contemporary American discourse contrasts not just with the urgent babble of voices offering opinions on the subject at the turn of the 1960s, but also with the persistence of debates about the Vietnam War as a whole. Although political leaders have frequently urged the country to move beyond the contentious memory of the war – ‘surely the statute of limitations has been reached?’ said President George H.W. Bush in his 1989 inaugural address – former doves have continued to argue that Vietnam was a war that should never have been fought, former hawks that it was a noble cause poorly prosecuted. Yet, within the parameters of this broader debate lie clues to the quiet that has descended upon the My Lai massacre: whichever of the two main positions one took with respect to Vietnam – that it was a bad war, or a good war fought badly – was consistent with the view that American veterans of the conflict had been terribly ill-served by their political and military masters. In the late 1970s and 1980s the theme of the veteran as victim – either of domestic indifference or Vietnamese vindictiveness (there was a pervasive and powerful post-war myth that the Communist regime in Vietnam still held many of their comrades in chains) – was constantly reprised in the efforts of Hollywood to deal with the legacies of the war.

Amidst these invocations of American victimhood, the memory of atrocities committed by US soldiers against Vietnamese civilians seemed culturally dissonant, almost subversive. Even those veterans who had made victims of others could find an audience for their claim to victim status for themselves. After all, it had not been their choice, but that of their government, to fight a war in a country where the enemy was continuous with, and often indistinguishable from, the civilian population. It was not their fault, then, that innocent civilians had sometimes suffered at their hands, but it was the veterans, rather than the government, who had to live thereafter with intimate knowledge of what they had done. Indeed, participation in atrocity came to constitute a qualification for sympathy and medical care: according to a series of clinical studies, this was the ‘combat stressor’ that correlated most commonly with the diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder in Vietnam veterans.

Even those veterans who had talked most loudly about atrocity during the conflict itself – for example, the members of Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) – tended after it had ended to direct their energies towards the fulfilment of their own needs and desires, seeking an enlarged package of veteran benefits from the government and demanding national recognition of the sacrifices they had made, consistent with the deference accorded those who had served in earlier wars. To return to the subject of atrocity risked the failure of these campaigns; once the campaigns had succeeded, as they did in large measure, a quality of impertinence seemed to attach itself to any new effort to call into moral question the conduct of the war. Running for the Presidency last year, one-time VVAW spokesman Senator John F. Kerry found it more convenient politically to emphasize the choice he had made to serve in Vietnam rather than his public declaration in 1971 that veterans were ‘ashamed of and hated what we were called to do’ in the war. Even then, in what many commentators have seen as a decisive intervention in the election, a group of Kerry’s fellow ‘swift-boat’ veterans drew attention to his earlier statements and denounced them as a betrayal.

The strains of solipsism and self-pity evident in US memories of Vietnam were able to develop in part because the principal victims of the war – Vietnamese civilians like the villagers of Son My – were essentially excluded from American culture. For about fifteen years after the fall of Saigon, few opportunities existed for the survivors of the massacre, and other Vietnamese who had been bereaved or maimed by American forces, to direct the attention of the US public back to their sufferings. Throughout this period, the Vietnamese voices heard most often in the United States were those of exiles and refugees, victims of the revolution, not the American war. A handful of Americans were able to visit the memorial constructed on the site of the killings in Son My, but they were mostly radical activists with an established record of sympathy for the revolutionary cause and their influence upon mainstream attitudes back home was modest at best; in general, foreign access to Son My was limited to fraternal Communist delegations from Eastern Europe and Cuba. Furthermore, even after the end of the Cold War, when party leaders in Hanoi sought to compensate for the disappearance of Soviet subsidies by encouraging an influx of Western (particularly American) tourists, Son My remained somewhat isolated from the principal circuits of visitor traffic. Well into the 1990s, foreigners who wished to visit the massacre memorial required a permit from the local police.

Yet the displacement of the My Lai massacre and other American combat atrocities from the national memory of the Vietnam experience was not entirely a post-war development. Even as the massacre dominated public discourse within the United States, from the initial revelations in November 1969 to the aftermath of Calley’s court-martial in spring 1971, the sufferings of the victims became neutralized as a source of national anxiety and remorse. Combat photographs of the villagers moments before they were killed, or lying dead thereafter on the ground, were frequently published in the media, but the victims were rarely, if ever, identified. No survivors were called to testify at any of the massacre courts-martial. Even the few survivor accounts that did appear in the American media had a rather incidental quality: a face appearing on a screen, personal horrors briskly summarized, the camera moves on, never to return. What the images of the massacre, the judicial proceedings and the coverage in the press tended to record was only the termination of lives in Son My, not the social and emotional investments that produced and nurtured them, nor the social value of the individuals themselves, nor their potential to produce more – the wasting of all of which marked the true dimensions of the My Lai crime.

Americans, indeed, were far more interested in the character and fate of the perpetrators than those of their victims. As many media commentators noted, there seemed to be nothing in the background of the soldiers involved that explained how they had come to engage so willingly in slaughter. ‘They were Everyman,’ commented Time, ‘decent in their daily lives, who at home in Ohio or Vermont would regard it as unthinkable to maliciously strike a child, much less kill one.’ The soldiers of Charlie Company, particularly William Calley, were frequently represented in the media as members of a recognizable national community, in army uniform or at home, in the company of family and friends, surrounded by the goods and chattels of an ordinary American life. These images perhaps precipitated the thought: if these men could unload their weapons upon Vietnamese women and children, how many Americans could say for certain that, in the same situation, they would not have acted the same way? Many Americans, indeed, seemed both to identify with the crime itself and to sympathize with the soldiers who had committed it. Respondents to one opinion poll were asked what they would have done if, as a soldier in Vietnam, they had been ordered by a superior officer to shoot all the inhabitants of a village suspected of aiding the enemy, including old men, women and children. Fifty-one per cent affirmed that they would have obeyed. Of the 96 per cent who claimed awareness of the verdict in Calley’s trial, the vast majority registered their belief that his conviction had been unjust, that something or someone else was to blame, such as the pressures of war or the senior officers who had supervised the assault upon Son My.

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