



Haberle/Time-Life

THE MY LAI MASSACRE

The scenes of slaughter tore at America's conscience—and led many Americans to withdraw their support for the war.

In the fall of 1969, war-weary America received a new shock from the distant battlefields of Vietnam. On November 13, newspapers across the country printed accounts of a gruesome massacre that had occurred some 19 months earlier at a small Vietnamese hamlet known as My Lai 4.

On March 16, 1968, U.S. soldiers of the 23rd Infantry Battalion had entered the hamlet, rounded up old men, women, and children and killed them. The newspaper stories described how the soldiers beat and raped women before shooting them, and how they had murdered babies with pistol shots to the head. When the rampage was over, some 567 Vietnamese civilians were dead. The soldiers had not been fired on, nor was there any apparent

danger from the people of the hamlet.

The scenes of slaughter stunned the nation and ultimately became a symbol of its Vietnam War trauma. "I sent them a good boy, and they made him a murderer," cried the mother of one of the soldiers at My Lai.

SOUL-SEARCHING

For the next two years, the country would be tormented by the issue of American war crimes in Vietnam and consumed by a rare and profound soul-searching. Who was responsible for My Lai? The soldiers who pulled the triggers, or the generals and politicians who gave the orders to kill? Was My Lai an isolated act? Or was it the logical outcome of a brutal war that killed civilians as a matter of course? These were only some of the ques-

tions that tore at the American conscience—and led many Americans to withdraw their support for the war.

More than 100 soldiers participated in the attack at My Lai. But the story of the massacre might never have been exposed to the world if not for the efforts of an outraged young helicopter door-gunner, Ron Ridenhour. Ridenhour had not been at My Lai, but several soldiers who had been there told him of the killings.

Ridenhour began to write letters to government officials, asserting his belief that "something dark and bloody" had occurred at My Lai. After months of being ignored, he told his story to free-lance journalist Seymour Hersh. While investigating Ridenhour's claims, Hersh discovered pictures of the massacre taken by an Army photographer. The photographs, and Hersh's account of the massacre, appeared in dozens of newspapers and led the Army to launch its own investigation.

The Army concluded that top military officers had deliberately covered up the massacre. Eventually, the

Above: Victims of the massacre. Facing page: Lieutenant William Calley Jr.

Army charged 25 soldiers and officers with participating in the killings or in the subsequent cover-up—but only one, Lieutenant William Calley Jr., was ever convicted of a crime.

At first, the public's reaction to the massacre was disbelief. This was followed by anger—at the press. When the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* published photographs of My Lai, for example, it was accused of being "anti-Ameri-

trolled dozens of sympathetic villages and hamlets, and looked and dressed just like the civilian population.

U.S. military planners believed the key to victory was to flush out and kill as many of the Vietcong as possible—and destroy the villages that harbored them. "You've got to dry up the sea the guerrillas swim in—that's the peasants," explained one general, "and the best way to do that is to blast

"The military high command treated all Vietnamese life cheaply," award-winning Vietnam War correspondent Neil Sheehan told *UPDATE*. "The soldier just followed the high command's example. The soldiers were full of hatred because their comrades were constantly being killed by guerrillas and the peasants who supported them. They came to see all Vietnamese as vermin to be exterminated." Sheehan points out that tens of thousands of other civilian deaths were caused by the bombing of Vietnamese villages. My Lai was exceptional only because the killing was done at point-blank range by regular troops.

MOUNTING CASUALTIES

As the war dragged on, and the casualties mounted, millions of Americans struggled with their consciences—and came to believe that the war was doing something terribly wrong to our country.

Testifying before Congress in the midst of the Calley murder trial, Jan Barry, a Vietnam combat veteran, summarized the moral agony of many: "With the trial of Lieutenant Calley the real dilemma of my generation has been brought home. Going to Vietnam is a war crime, refusing to go is a domestic crime, and just being quiet is a moral crime."

In March 1971, exactly three years after the My Lai massacre, Calley was convicted by an Army court martial of premeditated murder and sentenced to life in prison. But after the intervention of President Richard Nixon, his sentence was reduced. He spent only three years under house arrest in an apartment at a military base.

A SCAPEGOAT?

Many Americans saw Calley as a scapegoat, a lamb sent to slaughter, while the higher officers, who had either ordered the massacre or had failed to report it, escaped conviction.

But the American people, whether they felt Calley had been done an injustice or not, were not in support of the killing of civilians as a normal part of war. The fighting in Vietnam would drag on for another three years. But after My Lai, public opinion would turn irrevocably against the war.

—Steven Manning



UPI/Bettmann

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can." But the details emerging from the Calley trial fed public doubts about the war. Many Americans already questioned the government's assertions that we were winning the war. Now My Lai raised an even more troubling question: Was our conduct of the war immoral, even criminal?

HIT-AND-RUN TACTICS

As Americans were to discover, Vietnam was radically different from past U.S. wars. Unlike World Wars I or II, Vietnam was a "guerrilla" war. From their bases in the countryside, the Communist Vietcong enemy practiced hit-and-run tactics designed to bloody American troops and undermine their morale. The Vietcong con-

trolled dozens of sympathetic villages and hamlets, and looked and dressed just like the civilian population.

Moreover, the most important measure of progress in the war was the number of enemy killed, popularly known as the "body count." The pressure for producing a high body count ran from the Pentagon and White House down to the combat units. The success of a leader was determined by how many enemy were killed under his command—and some commanders did not care whether the bodies were enemy or civilian.

"Our Colonel kept asking us, 'Where's your body count, where's your body count,'" Calley explained during his trial. "I did what every lieutenant had to: I finally got us a body count."