

**The 'My Lai Massacre' Narrative in
American History and Memory:
A Story of American Conservatism**

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Abstract

This thesis uses the referent “My Lai Massacre” to refer to the mythic memory of what happened in Son My on 16 March, 1968. It argues that it is a fitting name for the way it captures the ethnocentrism of the memory in the name by perpetuating an American misnomer rooted in ignorance. It also singularizes the scope of horrors of the day, and fails to differentiate ‘the massacre’ from the domestic turmoil with which it was conflated. The My Lai Massacre narrative as it currently exists in American history and memory is ‘exceptionalist’ in that it incorporates and excludes story elements in such a way that casts it as a highly exceptional occurrence.

The main argument of this thesis is that American history and memory of the ‘My Lai Massacre’ have, to a large degree, been defined and shaped by conservative influences. In the time since the news of the atrocities became public this has manifested itself in a number of ways and is not confined to conservative histories of the war. Despite the hold liberal orthodox scholarship has on the history of the war, there remains within it, this thesis argues, a conservative trend regarding the massacres in Son My. Reactions, explanations, and rationalizations that appeared in early conservative responses to news of the massacres have survived into a wider ideological spectrum of Vietnam scholarship and memory than that from which it came.

Although it seems at first consideration an unlikely event from which a usable past might be constructed, the My Lai Massacre does get used in a didactic manner. This thesis examines some of the most prevalent ways the memory of My Lai functions as a *usable past*. The My Lai Massacre has been incorporated into a number of ‘lessons of the past’ that tend to be derived from conservative narratives of the war.

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Introduction

On 23 March 2014, one week after the 46th anniversary of massacres committed by American soldiers in Son My village during the Vietnam War – often remembered as the ‘My Lai massacre’ – media outlets were reporting on the story once again. This time the story seemed to carry a bit more substance than the obligatory harking back usually saved for major anniversaries. The news item was about the addition of former Chief of Staff H.R. Haldeman’s personal notes to the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum. One of the notes revealed that members of the Nixon administration, including the president, intended to interfere with the My Lai investigation by discrediting witnesses.¹ Certainly this was a newsworthy story, yet the CBS report received about as much attention as Haldeman’s notes did when they were originally made public – 28 years ago. Maybe it was because the news concerned a dead president whose reputation is already sullied (*‘why kick a guy when he’s down?’*). It may also have been that many Americans believe, as a later president put it, the statute of limitations had been reached on Vietnam long ago.² Whatever the case, the coming and going of the recent news story is somewhat similar to America’s memory of the massacre, more broadly speaking: not because America has forgotten the massacre, but because the nation’s memory of it has settled on a particular mythology and there is little interest in disturbing the layer of sediment obscuring the real complexities of the atrocities committed in Son My.

¹ Evie Salomon, “Document Points to Nixon in My Lai Cover-Up Attempt” CBSNews.com, 23 March, 2014. Online: <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/document-points-to-nixon-in-my-lai-cover-up-attempt/>. Accessed 30 March, 2014.

² George H. W. Bush, Inaugural Address, 20 January, 1989. Online: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=16610&st=&st1=>. Accessed 20 January, 2014.

Kendrick Oliver noted in the preface to *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory*, that speaking and writing about the ‘My Lai massacre’ involves a “necessary, if unfortunate, fiction.”³ He refers to the fact that the name ‘My Lai’ is a misnomer in that it was not the name used by the inhabitants of the area but rather it was an American designation. Unfortunately the proper names of the sub-hamlets in which the atrocities were committed remain largely unknown to the greater public in America.⁴ The ‘fiction’ of the misnomer persists supposedly because it is necessary in order to avoid confusion and excessive in-text correctives when writing about the ‘My Lai Massacre.’ Undoubtedly there are some more prosaic concerns, of greater interest to the likes of publishers who dictate the continued use of more familiar names, such as a widely recognizable subject or book title. Scott Laderman addresses a different but related issue in an article titled, “A Necessary Salve: The ‘Hue Massacre’ in History and Memory.” The quotation marks around ‘Hue Massacre’ give a clue to the crux of his argument; he is challenging the validity of the conventional narrative of the massacre. He argues a mythology persists despite good evidence that contradicts or casts suspicion on it, because the conventional narrative served, and continues to serve, a purpose. Laderman capitalizes the name ‘Hue Massacre’ to indicate he is using a proper name for the conventional narrative rather than a referent for a set of historical events.⁵ The Hue Massacre, for Laderman, refers to the myth, not particular events of the past (which he argues are fabricated) generally associated with the name. In the case of the ‘My Lai Massacre’ – to borrow

³ Kendrick Oliver, *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2006), viii.

⁴ My Lai is a real place, but none of the massacres occurred there. My Lai is the name of a hamlet beside Tu Cung and Co Luy – the two hamlets in which most of the killing took place. See Chapter 1, page 24.

⁵ Scott Laderman, “A Necessary Salve: The ‘Hue Massacre’ in History and Memory” in *Theatres of Violence: Massacre, Mass Killing and Atrocity Throughout History* ed. Philip G. Dwyer, Lyndall Ryan (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 215.

Laderman's method of differentiating myth from history - the fiction extends well beyond the misnomers that Oliver identifies. Of course I do not mean to suggest there is any question about the occurrence of the My Lai Massacre. Instead, I wish to examine the constructed nature of the conventional narrative of the massacre: how it is contextualized, sanitized, minimized, exceptionalized, and how the narrative functions as a part of America's past. This thesis is mostly about the production and proliferation of the conventional narrative – for which the name 'My Lai Massacre' is appropriate. At times I refer to events that fall outside the most common conventional narratives of the massacre, and for which there is no widely accepted name.⁶ When I refer to actual historical events that may or may not be part of the conventional narrative I try to differentiate these instances in my text by using the proper names of the municipal subdivisions in which they occurred. There are many instances when I refer to 'the massacre' or 'My Lai'; in almost all cases these are references to the conventional narrative of a single massacre. I have chosen to call the sum of events that transpired on 16 March 1968 in Son My, the Son My massacres. In the years since the massacres some people have referred to them by this name (almost exclusively in singular form though), but it has never come close to common usage. Chapter one of this thesis addresses the conventional narrative of the massacre and offers a number of correctives. The correctives are based almost entirely on the contents of the Peers Report documents, including the actual report as well as witness testimony. The Peers Report has been available to the public since 1974; it was even published in full in 1976. The deviation between the corrective and most popular accounts, coupled with the fact that the most exhaustive

⁶ Simon Hall suggests that the name 'My Lai massacre' does refer to the sum of events. See chapter three for further explanation of this point. Simon Hall, "Scholarly Battles over the Vietnam War" *The Historical Journal* 52-3 (2009), 824.

primary source on the subject has been available to the authors of such accounts since 1974 suggests that the massacres have not registered with the kind of import that is often assumed.

At points in this thesis I address errors and inconsistencies in others' work. In many cases the massacres in Son My are not the primary focus of these writers' work. My purpose is not to simply offer a corrective, for there are several complete and adequate accounts of the massacres.⁷ Nor is it my intention to assert some higher knowledge, but instead I address the errors and inconsistencies to help illustrate one of my underlying arguments: that the massacres in Son My have not received the overabundance of attention that is sometimes claimed. For example, B.G. Burkett, a Vietnam veteran and conservative author, writes that the My Lai massacre triggered a "feeding frenzy" among antiwar journalists, and that "[s]ince then, millions of words have been written about what happened at My Lai."⁸ Mark Woodruff, a former U.S. Marine and author of *Unheralded Victory: Who Won the Vietnam War?*, a conservative revisionist history of the war, echoes the sentiment by complaining that "it is indeed a rare popular history that does not emphasize this singular event."⁹ Among conservatives it is a basic truism that the attention My Lai and other supposedly 'isolated' (and very rarely mentioned)

⁷ Possibly the most thorough and often cited study of the Son My massacres is Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim's *Four Hours in My Lai* (London: Penguin Books, 1992). Seymour Hersh's original investigative journalism and his subsequent two books on the Son My attack and cover-up are excellent for their time: Seymour Hersh, *My Lai 4: A Report on the Massacre and Its Aftermath*, (New York: Random House, 1970); Seymour Hersh, *Cover-up: the Army's Secret Investigation of the Massacre at My Lai 4*, (New York: Random House, 1972). Richard Hammer's journalistic accounts of the massacres and the trials that he compiled into a monograph is also a thoughtful contemporaneous study: Richard Hammer, *The Court-Martial of Lieutenant Calley*, (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1971) and *One Morning in the War* (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1970). Shortly after the 'Department of the Army Review of the Preliminary Investigations into the My Lai Incident' (better known as the Peers Report and sometimes mistakenly referred to as the Peer Commission) was made public, it was published in a volume with additional commentary and legal analysis: Joseph Goldstein, Burke Marshall, and Jack Schwartz, *The My Lai Massacre and its Cover-up: Beyond the Reach of Law? The Peers Commission Report with a Supplement and Introductory Essay on the Limits of Law* (New York: The Free Press, 1976).

⁸ B.G. Burkett and Glenna Whitley, *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation Was Robbed of its Heroes and its History* (Dallas: Verity Press, 1998), 115.

⁹ Mark Woodruff, *Unheralded Victory: Who Won the Vietnam War?* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), 208.

atrocities are accorded sullies the reputation of American soldiers, and is a continuation of the kind of misrepresentation of American involvement in Vietnam that some argue undermined the war effort.¹⁰ Yet despite all the attention My Lai has supposedly received over the years, the same basic factual errors, omissions, and mix-ups continue to crop up in writing, from journalism intended for mass consumption, to scholarly articles and monographs. Presumably if the massacres in Son My had received the kind of studied attention conservative critics have claimed, there would be fewer basic “errors of inattention” regarding the massacres littered throughout the writing on the Vietnam War.¹¹ Furthermore, if there has been too much written about the My Lai Massacre, how should one understand the numerous claims made throughout the 1980s that high school and college-age students had not even heard of it (let alone the full extent of atrocities in all of Son My)?¹² In fact, from the late 1970s until very recently, the massacres in Son My, including the most well-known details that form the basis of the common narrative of the My Lai Massacre, have had a very minimal role in American Vietnam War historiography.¹³ This is true even though the majority of this writing has come from what is termed the ‘orthodox’ camp of interpretation: an interpretation that is critical of the war and supposedly the heir of the antiwar movement.

¹⁰ Both Burkett and Woodruff make this very point in the pages cited above. For additional examples, see Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), particularly chapter 9 “Atrocities: Fiction and Fact,” and Norman Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 187-189.

¹¹ The term “errors of inattention” is a term used by Kendrick Oliver to describe simple mistakes that, on more familiar subjects, would most certainly be caught prior to publication. Kendrick Oliver, *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory*, 264.

¹² Christian Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 339 n.38. Myra MacPherson, “Now We Are All Veterans of Vietnam” *Washington Post*, 27 May, 1984. C4. Lee Lescaze and Anne Mackay-Smith, “Ten Years After” *Wall Street Journal*, 24 January, 1985. 1.

¹³ Since the declassification of the Vietnam War Crimes Working Group files there has been renewed interest in the subject of American conduct in Vietnam. The first book-length studies resulting from this source were published in the late 2000s. See page 114.

The main argument of this thesis is that American history and memory of the My Lai Massacre have, to a large degree, been defined and shaped by conservative influences rather than, as most conservatives themselves would argue, by the ‘left.’ This manifests itself in a number of different ways that I will demonstrate in later chapters. The conservative influences I refer to come in many forms, but are primarily the voices of journalists, and pundits, as well as historians. Some of these sources are easily identifiable as conservative because that is how they self-identify. Others are less clearly identifiable and so I rely mostly on George Nash (a conservative himself). I use his characterization of postwar American conservatism to categorize some of my sources as ‘conservative.’ Specifically Nash identifies individualism, anti-communism, and traditionalism as fundamental elements of American conservatism in this era.¹⁴ In this regard, some of the influences I identify as conservative do not necessarily come from individuals who are overtly conservative, but who exhibit conservative traits in their thinking about the My Lai Massacre. The conventional narrative emphasizes the personal traits of the ‘central characters,’ particularly those of William Calley, the man situated at the centre of the popular narrative. Frequently the story is one about ‘Charlie Company’ rather than the Army. The story of ‘the massacre’ is often contextualized within narratives that incorporate themes that were prevalent in early conservative rationalizations, such as the ambiguities of guerrilla warfare and ‘communist brutality’ in general. Most often the massacre is isolated from other American atrocities (including the massacre in My Hoi) during the war and treated as unique. There is consistent minimization of the brutality, or a rather, a narrowing of the types of violence perpetrated which lends more credibility to various rationalizations that should otherwise be ignored. For example, marginalization of the rampant sexual violence committed by the troops

¹⁴ George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* Thirtieth-Anniversary Edition (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2006), xx-xxi.

tends to give credence to arguments that the men were ‘scared and out of control.’ There are often broad statements made about how it supposedly changed the course of the war. Sometimes the My Lai Massacre is even associated with losing the war. Finally, some pundits insist there were lessons learned from My Lai and the Army, and country is somehow wiser and better for it.

The earliest conservative response to news of the massacre in ‘My Lai (4)’ (other than outright denial) was to isolate and contain guilt to within a handful of supposedly ‘rogue’ GIs. Conservatives have insisted that the massacre explains little about American conduct in Vietnam; the war was fought ‘in earnest’ and the conduct of a few criminals should not overshadow this fact. At most, from their perspective, it revealed truths about the difficulty in the way the war was being fought, and the nature of the Vietnamese enemy. Conservatives sought to contextualize the massacre within what they argued was a larger horror of communist brutality. America’s massacre did not accordingly offer any insight into the morality of America’s war, and therefore, beyond the administration of justice for the few men thought to be involved, it did not warrant the prolonged attention of the nation. “The judicial process will establish whether a crime has been committed” wrote the prominent conservative pundit William F. Buckley, “Why is there any need, just now, to say more than that?”¹⁵

Once the judicial process had run its course, however, it seems there was still little need to say more about the massacre. Indeed, there has been a chorus of conservatives since claiming essentially, *the guilty were charged, what more is there to say?*¹⁶ There was certainly a reluctance (or indifference) among most Americans to draw parallels between the massacre and

¹⁵ William F. Buckley, “The Great Atrocity Hunt,” *National Review* 16 Dec. 1969, 1252. Buckley was possibly the most influential American conservative author, and television personality of the 20th century. He founded the *National Review* and hosted a conservative talk show, the *Firing Line*, for 33 years.

¹⁶ For example, see Phyllis Schlafly quoted in Donald Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman’s Crusade* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), 204.

the larger war, and conservatives rejected such comparisons outright. In the 1980s, American conservatives began to promote a historical reassessment of the war and sought to erase the memory of Vietnam as a ‘bad war.’ They emphasized the valor and patriotism of veterans and conflated respect for veterans with a positive memory of the war. Conservatives offered a reassessment of the war that made it fit better with the national mythology of America as a righteous nation with a long history of fighting for honourable causes. They maligned the antiwar movement as a remnant of ‘the 60s.’ Conservatives conflated the war with the warriors and insisted the antiwar movement was responsible for the supposed mistreatment and abuse of returning Vietnam War veterans. Despite the fact that veterans formed a critical and central role in the antiwar movement at its peak, and returning GIs were considered natural allies rather than enemies, the conservative revision of the relationship between veterans and the antiwar movement had largely altered national memory by the 1990s. The myth of the ‘spat upon veteran’ began to flourish.¹⁷ Such an emotionally charged approach to remembering the war was not conducive to a reasoned analysis of atrocities such as those committed in Son My. The My Lai Massacre, even in its conservative narrative form, was marginalized in popular texts. Chapter two of this thesis identifies some fundamental values and ideas of American conservatives in the postwar World War Two period, and relates them to various contemporary assessments of the massacre. It also examines the cultural climate of the 1980s and 1990s and proposes that some of the characteristics of this climate promoted a conservative narrative that has concretized into the ‘My Lai Massacre.’

A glance through the most influential American surveys of the Vietnam War in the 1980s and 1990s reveals a surprising lack of scholarly interest in the massacre (let alone massacres) as

¹⁷ For a full and original analysis of this myth, see Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and The Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

an important historical fact of the war. For the most part it has been treated as exceptional and as such it maintains an incidental character in most narratives of the war. It is a rare American survey of the war that grants more than a paragraph to the subject, and many only a passing sentence or two to ‘the massacre.’¹⁸ Rarer still are histories that offer an assessment of the available sources that challenges the traditional narrative and situates the massacre within the massive wave of *discriminate* violence that was directed against the civilian population of Quang Ngai province (and much of the rest of the country) by the American Army, Marines, and Navy, as well as the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and the Republic of Korea (ROK) forces. The massacre narrative is drawn out from this pattern of violence and framed as exceptional based on a construction of specific, well-known details that are only a small part of a much larger story. On the other hand, as we will see, a good deal of attention is given to factors that are proposed to mitigate the massacre: factors such as an uncertain distinction between enemy and civilian, frustration over American losses, a sense of pointlessness due to an unclear mission and lack of support from home, and the very nature of Vietnam. Narratives of the massacre in survey texts of the war almost always emphasize elements that tend to obscure, and rationalize culpability. The story is cast as one that is confusing and for which there are few certain details. The personal traits of the men of C Company, particularly Calley, and their specific experiences in the region before the attack are cast as significant story elements in the

¹⁸ Many influential orthodox histories of the war only mention the massacre in passing, in some cases only a sentence or two. For Example, see: George Herring, *America’s Longest War: the United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: Wiley, 1979), Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), John Prados, *The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), William S. Turley, *The Second Indochina War: A Concise Political and Military History* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009) (Turley does offer a brief elaboration in a footnote.), Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America’s Lost War* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), David L. Anderson ed. *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). Some offer slightly more information and contextualization, but as we will see later, the additional wordage does not necessarily mean better coverage. See Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), Gerald J. DeGroot, *A Noble Cause? America and the Vietnam War* (Essex: Harlow, 2000).

conventional narrative. Furthermore, in most surveys of the war the massacre committed by B Company is almost never mentioned in relation to the ‘My Lai Massacre.’¹⁹ This point has been made by a few others who have written about the massacres in Son My, even very early, yet the point is largely ignored and the omission persists in many accounts of the war.²⁰ The result of these and other emphases and omissions is a highly exceptionalist narrative – one that I relate to early conservative responses to the massacres and that I argue has become the orthodoxy. It has been indirectly perpetuated by various conservative interpretations of the Vietnam War since. Indeed, a good deal of the American historiography of the war since its ending, much of which is not generally considered conservative, did more to establish and canonize an exceptionalist and mythical narrative of the My Lai Massacre, than to offer an historical account of the Americal Division’s atrocities in Son My. Chapter three of this thesis examines the roots and characteristics of the exceptionalist narrative of the My Lai Massacre, and the various ways American history and memory of the massacre have adopted it. The chapter cites several instances of exceptionalist narratives in conservative and more liberal sources. Of particular interest here, is the way orthodox history and more popular sources have taken on a narrow exceptionalist view of ‘the massacre.’

According to Michael Doidge in the conclusion to *Triumph Revisited*, the “orthodox interpretation of the Vietnam War was in power” before the end of the war and long before revisionist interpretations emerged. He cites the My Lai Massacre as one of several images that

¹⁹ For example, none of the historians cited in n.18 mention B company’s massacre in My Hoi.

²⁰ Seymour Hersh, *Cover-Up: The Army’s Secret Investigation of the Massacre at My Lai 4*. Most of the portion that refers to the ‘My Khe massacre’ was published initially in two articles: “Coverup-I” *The New Yorker*, 22 January, 1972 and “Coverup-II” *The New Yorker*, 29 January, 1972. Also see Richard Hammer, *The Court-martial of Lt. Calley* and Richard Hammer, *One Morning in the War*. For a much more complete list of references in American historiography of the Vietnam War to the massacre committed by B Company see Mark J. Taylor, “The Massacre at My Khe 4: A Different Story” (PhD. diss., The University of Hull, 2010), 8 n.21, n.23.

“burned themselves into the U.S.’s national identity, where they potentially remain to this day.”²¹ Diodge refers to the massacre and the fabled national response as though it goes without saying that My Lai Massacre is a part of a general understanding of the war that supports the orthodox interpretation. Yet so many orthodox surveys of the war give short shrift to the massacre and do not offer significantly different contextualization from more conservative sources. This sort of conventional view of where the massacre sits in terms of the balance of evidence regarding the war is part of the reason it is counter-intuitive to think of My Lai in terms of a conservative memory about the war: it seemed to be so destructive to conservative goals when it happened, and contrary to a conservative memory of the war since. The My Lai Massacre “put conservatives on the defensive” as Donald Critchlow, a historian of American conservatism put it, “and provided further ammunition to those urging the withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam.”²² But I contend that conservatives’ defence of this threat produced interpretations that have been more lasting than those of antiwar pundits of the 1960s and 70s. This is due in part to the fact that some conservative takes on the massacre are more compatible with dominant national narratives in the decades since the war. The nation did not want to accept the massacres in Son My for what they really were, nor were there figures of cultural or political leadership calling for a proper accounting and reconciliation for the crimes. Arguments offering explanations, rationalizations, and minimizations carried more weight than those that demanded admission, acceptance, and reparations. This is not to say that conservative interpretations of the massacre are the only ones that are prevalent, but rather that they have held their ground over the years and thus do help to define and shape the discourse regarding the massacre. Most

²¹ Andrew Wiest and Michael J. Doidge, eds., *Triumph Revisited: Historians Battle for the Vietnam War* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 224. Doidge is an American military historian who specializes in the Cold War.

²² Donald Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman’s Crusade*, 204.

fundamental is the way conservatives draw lessons from My Lai: something was learned; the Army and the nation are somehow better for it; it was a ‘rite of passage;’ it is a symbol of American exceptionalism. This is the area in which conservative thought regarding the massacre has been most prevalent. Turning the memory of the My Lai Massacre into a didactic tool as part of a ‘usable past’ has mostly met conservative ends. Chapter four examines the myriad ways in which this conventional narrative of the massacre has been put to use.

In some portions of this thesis many of the primary sources are the work of historians because my primary focus is what they have written about the massacres rather than the historical events and actors. My primary concern is with the influence of American conservatism on the development of the My Lai Massacre narrative, and the hold it has maintained on this narrative in the decades since the end of the war despite the relative lack of command such thinking has of the narrative of the war as a whole. In this regard my thesis is a work of intellectual history. I have examined writing on the subject of ‘My Lai’ by some prominent conservatives in newspapers, journals and monographs in order to establish some of the basic tenets of a conservative view of the massacre, both contemporaneously and historically. Additionally I have surveyed a number of popular and influential American histories of the Vietnam War – particularly those of the ‘orthodox’ interpretation - in order to map the way such historians tend to incorporate the My Lai Massacre into their histories of the war. It is the overlap between conservative renditions of the massacre (informed by some basic tenets of American conservatism I identify in chapter two), and liberal-orthodox historiography that I find remarkable.

My approach to the Son My massacres is somewhat similar to the way Keith Jenkins suggests historians should approach their subjects, by getting into “the minds of historians

[rather] than the minds of the people who lived in the past and who only emerge, strictly speaking, through the minds of historians anyway.”²³ I contend there is something missing from most histories of the massacres because of historians’ reluctance to engage with questions of ethics. To comb the sources for all the plausible ‘explanations’ for the massacres, and to avoid the supposed ‘ridiculousness’ of moral judgments is in itself a moral decision, and one that fails to capture fundamental aspects of acts committed in Son My.²⁴ All too often the explanations are simple and overlook the moral choices that participants faced. This is not to argue that a detached assessment of sources, conditions, and contexts, should be dispensed with, but rather to argue that there should be accommodation for moral considerations, and these accommodations may in fact help rather than hinder the process of historical inquiry.²⁵ This comes from an acknowledgment that history is inescapably ideological and therefore underpinned by moral considerations. In this regard I am recognizing the value of moral inquiry in history and offering an account that is shaped by moral considerations.²⁶ The limited ability of historians to offer

²³ Keith Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History* (London: Routledge, 1991), 47.

²⁴ Richard Evens writes of the ridiculousness of moral judgements in *In Defence of History* (London: Granta Books, 1997), 51. Marc Bloch also warns historians against the ‘embarrassment’ and ‘absurdity’ of moral judgements in historical scholarship and suggests that making such judgements leads to the dispensation of historical explanations. *The Historian’s Craft* (New York: Vintage Books, 1953), 140.

²⁵ This is precisely the point Kendrick Oliver makes in an article for *The Historical Journal*. He writes, “the retreat from moral interpretation [within the discipline of history]...need not necessarily produce more incisive analyses of historical causation, but simply substitute the threat of unjust denunciation with other failures of intellectual discretion, such as dispensing with the burden of critical judgement altogether, seeking to ‘heal’ rather than to bring to account, and effacing both the agency and responsibility of historical actors by casting them as the pawns of a tragic and implacable fate.” (These are particular “failures of intellectual discretion” are prevalent in writing about the My Lai Massacre.) Oliver concludes, “the writing of a moral history begins not at the point that scholarship ends; rather, an active ethical curiosity can function as one of the better guides to what it is we need to know, as historians as much as conscientious citizens.” Kendrick Oliver in “Towards a New Moral History of the Vietnam War?” *The Historical Journal* 47-3 (2004): 759, 774.

²⁶ My thinking on this subject has been influenced by George Cotkin, particularly, “History’s Moral Turn,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69-2 (April, 2008): 293-315.

anything like an objective, ‘true’ account of the past places a premium on their willingness and ability to embrace moral questions.²⁷

This thesis is not entirely theoretical in nature: I begin the thesis with a corrective review of the most established facts of the massacres in Son My, with special emphasis on those details that have largely been ignored and contradict most conventional explanations for the massacres. For this purpose I rely heavily on the Peers Report and the massive amount of sworn testimony from which the report was compiled. While I acknowledge that the Peer’s Report is not without its flaws, and is itself, in a sense, a narrative construction, it is the best source available for such a task. Rather than to simply offer a new narrative (because it is not new and that is part of my point), I wish to emphasize the constructed nature of the most dominant My Lai narratives. There are traces of the past readily available that allow for – indeed, point to - the construction of significantly different narratives. What has driven the general consensus regarding the selection of evidence that makes up the conventional narrative of the massacre?

²⁷ Courtney Thomas, “History as Moral Commentary: Ideology and the Ethical Responsibilities of Remembrance” *Nebula* 1:3 (December 2004 – January 2005): 182.

CHAPTER 1

THE MASSACRES IN SON MY

On 16 March, 1968 an American Task Force conducted an attack on a populated region of South Vietnam with the expressed intent of engaging the remnants of a battalion of the People's Liberation Armed Forces. The PLAF was not present, however the three-company task force proceeded to destroy several sub-hamlets and their inhabitants. Initially the attack was reported within and outside the army as a military success resulting in 128 enemy casualties.²⁸ Rumours of the massacre quietly began to spread and in April 1968 Ronald Ridenhour, an American GI uninvolved in the 16 March operation but who had heard of the incident, conducted his own informal investigation over the better part of a year. He eventually accumulated enough evidence to convince himself of the legitimacy of the rumours and that something official had to be done. He wrote several letters to civilian military leaders and politicians with the hope of instigating an official investigation. Most of his letters were ignored by their recipients, but his persistence eventually paid off. After quietly investigating Ridenhour's claims, the army began an official investigation in August 1969. The first charges were laid against a platoon leader, Second Lieutenant William L. Calley Jr. Dozens more followed as the investigation unfolded. The first hint of the massacre in the press was on 6 September 1969 when a small Associated Press story reported that Calley had been charged, but there were no details and the story received almost no attention. It was not until 13 November, more than a year and a half after the massacre, that a story by journalist Seymour Hersh made the massacre a national news story. Shortly after, in an attempt to capitalize on the massacre, an army photographer sold a series of

²⁸ "G.I.'s, in Pincer Move, Kill 128 in a Daylong Battle" *New York Times* 17 March, 1968, 1. News of the attack on Son My as an Americal Division combat victory was also published in *The 11th Infantry Brigade Trident* vol. 1-11, 19 April, 1968.

photographs he had taken during the massacre – initially to the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, then with much greater national effect (and profit), to *Life* magazine. As the Criminal Investigation Division's (CID) investigation advanced it became clear a more in-depth inquiry was required to address what appeared to be attempts to cover up the crimes within the American Division's leadership ranks. In November Lieutenant General William Peers was appointed to lead the inquiry. Peers' inquiry was designated "The Department of the Army Review of the Preliminary Investigations into the My Lai Incident," and has since become better-known as the Peers Inquiry. Originally the scope of the inquiry only included the initial Army investigations and report on the massacre, but Peers quickly expanded the scope to include the actual events in Son My in order to properly assess the adequacy of the Army's investigation and report.²⁹

The country was initially shaken by the graphic images and the severity of the accusations. The media and public's focus quickly narrowed to Calley, partly because of his long court martial. Calley's case became a cause célèbre and the focus of national attention shifted from the atrocities committed by Americans against Vietnamese, to supposed injustices inflicted on Americans by Americans. Calley was the only person to be found guilty for crimes committed during the massacre and his sentence was eventually reduced by President Richard Nixon who was attempting to appeal to popular support for Calley. The massacre receded from the front pages of the national press almost as quickly as it had appeared. The very public trial and the particular acts of which Calley and his platoon were accused came to define the massacre in all but the most specific of academic studies. If there was widespread public concern for the Vietnamese victims and the fate of the survivors, it is not evident from most popular media

²⁹ Report of the Department of the Army Review of the Preliminary Investigations into the My Lai Incident (hereafter RDAR) Volume 1: Report of the Investigation, 14 March, 1970, 1-1.

coverage of the news that tended to focus on Calley's fate and the meaning of his conviction for other U.S. soldiers.³⁰

Most accounts of the My Lai massacre begin with some form of brief narrative of the events of 16 March, 1968. Many histories of the Vietnam War have an even briefer narrative of the massacre and its aftermath, or rather more often a passing sentence or two, often with a name, date, and number of casualties. Often these cursory references are part of broad surveys of the war that cover a range of subjects and time periods. One should not expect them to provide detailed coverage of every event of the war. But accuracy is important and there is a dissonance between the quantity and quality of analysis of the massacres and the supposed significance of the massacres to the history of the war. Despite the fact that there are hundreds of these accounts, there are very few that succinctly, accurately, and adequately convey the nature and scope of events that occurred that day.

Part of the difficulty might be related to geography and nomenclature. The limited scope of Calley's high-profile court case has also tended to define the massacre, particularly in the popular press. Ancillary to this is the problem of defining the scope of the massacre: in fact there were several independent massacres committed by American troops from different platoons and even different companies in three separate built-up areas on that day, only one of which was committed by the 1st Platoon of C Company in "My Lai 4" – the community most often said to be the location of the massacre. Some accounts group all the events together, others focus on the most well-known atrocities to the virtual exclusion of the others. Most often though the simple referent "My Lai massacre" is used vaguely to denote a mass atrocity of nebulous proportions

³⁰ Although knowing exactly what the public was thinking at a given time is very hard to establish, it stands to reason that a cross section of popular media sources is at least somewhat representative of popular currents of thought. Almost all attention in the press was focused on liability and its limits and related legal questions, and the potential impact of prosecuting American soldiers during wartime.

and details. This lack of clarity persists despite the fact that the most widely known and possibly the best account of what happened that day in 1968 - the Peers Report - has been publicly available since 1974.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide some historical background and evidence against which various narratives, interpretations, and so called ‘lessons of the past’ can be assessed. Often in scholarship and writing about the Vietnam War the massacres in Son My are not central to the themes, arguments, or story lines of their authors, but the massacres and the domestic fallout they caused were significant events in late 1969 and the early 1970s and they often make a brief appearance anyway. The ways writers summarize, explain, and contextualize the atrocities in Son My are revealing. How much attention the subject receives is dependent upon its relevance to the themes and arguments of the author, and the author’s particular sensibilities. The following explanation of details and narrative of events is based almost exclusively on the evidence contained in the Peers Report and the testimony and documents from which it was created. It is not exhaustive; rather, it is intended to emphasize or clarify some of the details that have been neglected in all but a handful of general accounts of the massacre or the broader war.

Geography

On 16 March, 1968 an American combat unit known as Task Force Barker conducted a search and destroy mission in the village of Son My, Quang Ngai Province. Quang Ngai Province is in the central-northern part of what was South Vietnam, on the coast of the South China Sea. On American military maps it was at the south end of the 1 Corps Tactical Zone (1 CTZ), or Military Region 1 – the northernmost region within the South.

During the course of the operation as many as 570 civilians were murdered by several different platoons of American GIs from two different companies within the Task Force.³¹ The massacres took place in at least three separate locations in an area called Son My village. The vast majority of references to the attack only refer to a ‘village’ called ‘My Lai 4,’ often with the addendum that the Americans knew of the place as ‘Pinkville.’ Rarely are the correct names for the village, hamlets, and sub-hamlets used in popular or scholarly accounts which presents some problems as we will see. In fact, Son My was an expanse of land subdivided into smaller areas known as hamlets. Within each hamlet there were separate built-up areas known as sub-hamlets. The most well-known massacre (the subject of most historical attention and the focus of the subsequent well-documented court case) is said to have occurred in My Lai 4 -thus the name of the massacre in American historical accounts and popular memory. In fact the name of the sub-hamlet where this particular massacre occurred was Xom Lang (more commonly known as Thuan Yen by its inhabitants and referred to by this name hereafter), and the proper name of the hamlet was Tu Cung. A massacre also occurred in Binh Tay, a sub-hamlet about half a kilometre north of Thuan Yen. A third massacre was also committed in My Hoi, in the hamlet of Co Luy approximately four kilometers east of Thuan Yen. This area was (and still is mostly) known by the American designation of My Khe 4. (See Appendix 1, Image 1.)

The name ‘My Lai 4’ was the American designation for Thuan Yen and Binh Tay (they were grouped together under one name due to their proximity). This was derived from an identification of Tu Cung as a part of My Lai hamlet; the sub-hamlet names were dropped and instead named after the hamlet with a numerical suffix. Thus Thuan Yen of Tu Cung became

³¹ The Son My village chief reported 570 civilian casualties after the attack. Joseph Goldstein, Burke Marshall, and Jack Schwartz, *The My Lai Massacre and its Cover-up: Beyond the Reach of Law? The Peers Commission Report with a Supplement and Introductory Essay on the Limits of Law*, 271. I will address the issue of casualty numbers in greater detail later in the chapter.

My Lai 4 on American military maps and in almost all of the historical accounts to this day. Additionally, variations, in spelling in initial reports have also persisted, thus there are countless references to ‘Song My,’ ‘Songmy,’ or ‘Mylai’ throughout the historiography and press records. That these misnomers have persisted in the popular press is not surprising as they were the names initially reported in the press and used by witnesses throughout the trials and in subsequent interviews over the years. What is more surprising, and somewhat disappointing is the minimal attention, let alone attempts at correction, these misnomers have received in academic writing, especially considering they were noted in the Peers Report in numerous locations.³² Some historians have acknowledged the misnomer. Richard Hammer was probably the first to give the issue attention in *One Morning in the War: The Tragedy at Son My*. Initially the confusion surrounding place names led Hammer to believe the Task Force attacked the wrong village. Christian Appy also briefly addresses the mistake in *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam*. Kendrick Oliver clarifies the misnomer in his preface to *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory*. Oliver acknowledges the apparent conflict between his emphasis on the lack of a Vietnamese perspective in America regarding the massacre and the continued use, including in his own work, of the American designations, but asks his readers to at least be aware of the misnomers. Others such as Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, authors of one of the most highly regarded accounts of the massacres, acknowledge the error but further confuse matters with inconsistent and inaccurate corrections. At one point they claim the American designation of My Lai 4 included all of Tu Cung hamlet -a much larger area than it in fact did. Later in the book (and on a map at the front of the book) they indicate that Tu

³² RDAR, Volume 1, 1-2, 1-16, 3-3, 5-2.

Cung was the proper name for the sub-hamlet marked My Lai 4 on American maps.³³ Michal R. Belknap repeats this error in his 2002 monograph.³⁴ Ironically Tim O'Brien's novel, *In the Lake of the Woods*, provides an accurate corrective of these misnomers as well.³⁵ Elsewhere there are scattered references to the real names of the communities throughout the sum of academic writing on the specific subject of the Son My massacres. General histories of the war rarely refer to anything other than a "village" named My Lai. Some writers have made conscious decisions for "the sake of expediency," not to confuse matters by attempting to use the proper names of these communities in their historical accounts. I argue that such a decision perpetuates an ethnocentricity that, in light of the subject matter, is particularly troubling.³⁶ Furthermore the survival of these misnomers in current histories is symptomatic of the lack of serious attention the massacre receives beyond its impact on Americans.

Task Force Barker

Task Force (TF) Barker was an interim unit within the 11th Light Infantry Brigade of the 23rd Americal Division of the Army. It consisted of three companies: A/3-1 Infantry, B/4-3 Infantry, and C/1-20 Infantry. The TF was named after its commanding officer, Lt-Col. Frank A. Barker. As of 15 March 1968 the TF was led by Capitan Colonel Oran K. Henderson, although

³³ Richard Hammer, *One Morning in the War: The Tragedy at Son My*, 33. Christian Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam*, 273. Kendrick Oliver, *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory*, viii. Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 97, 109, xv. I will use the proper names for these communities throughout this theses and offer reminders where I feel it is necessary to clarify the misnomers in quoted text.

³⁴ Michal R. Belknap, *The Vietnam War on Trial: The My Lai Massacre and the court-Martial of Lieutenant Calley* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 60.

³⁵ Tim O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin/Seymour Lawrence, 1994), 135-136.

³⁶ MAJ. Tony Raimondo, "The My Lai Massacre – A Case Study" Human Rights Program, School of the Americas, Fort Benning Georgia, 2004.

Barker was present for the attack and massacres on the 16th.³⁷ The conventional My Lai Massacre narrative usually attributes the attack to “Charlie Company.”³⁸

Company A/3-1 was commanded by Capitan William C. Riggs. Riggs’ company was not directly involved in any atrocities during the operation – at least according to the available sources – due to the fact that his company merely served as a security force for the helicopter landing zone from which the attacks were launched.³⁹

B Company was commanded by Capitan Earl Ray Michles and had approximately 115 field operational men during the mission.⁴⁰ B Company consisted of three rifle platoons (as well as a weapons platoon and security squad). Details concerning the actions of B Company are sparse and inconclusive beyond the fact that its assistance was not deemed necessary in Thuan Yen, and it did conduct a massacre in My Hoi – several kilometres away from the well-known atrocities committed by C Company. From an examination of their education, training, and experience, the Peers Report stated the following: “Taken as a whole, the personnel composition of Company B contained no significant deviation from the Army-wide average and there was little to distinguish it from other rifle companies.”⁴¹

Company C/1-20 was commanded by Capitan Ernest Medina and consisted of approximately 120 field operational men at around the time of the massacres.⁴² C Company was made up from five platoons, three of which were rifle platoons that took part in the massacres.

³⁷ LTC Barker died on 13 June 1968 along with Capitan Michles of B Company in a helicopter crash.

³⁸ In a rather odd contradiction authors often list with ‘military’ precision: ‘Charlie Company, First Battalion, 20th Infantry, 11th Brigade of the Americal Division,’ but then fail to mention the other two companies (A and B) involved in the mission. For example, see Harry G. Summers, Jr. *Vietnam War Almanac* (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1985), 257; B.G. Burkett and Glenna Whitley, *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation Was Robbed of its Heroes and its History*, 115.

³⁹ RDAR Volume 1, 5-7.

⁴⁰ RDAR Volume 1, 4-9.

⁴¹ RDAR Volume 1, 4-11.

⁴² RDAR Volume 1, 4-7.

The rifle platoon leaders were: First Platoon, Second Lieutenant William Calley; Second Platoon, Second Lieutenant Stephen Brooks; Third Platoon, Second Lieutenant Jeffery LaCross. Although Calley is the only platoon leader ever associated with the massacre, his peers were very much guilty of crimes too. Brooks not only excused rapes committed by his soldiers, he participated on occasion too. His platoon committed some of the grizzliest acts of the massacres while in Binh Tay, and Brooks was among those who killed.⁴³ LaCross's platoon conducted the final sweep of Thuan Yen, killing the remaining survivors and burning the homes. The Peers Report drew a similar conclusion about the men of C Company as that of others: "Taken as a whole, the personnel composition of Company C contained no significant deviation from the average and there was little to distinguish it from other rifle companies."⁴⁴

The Peers Report documents the training B and C Company received before the 16 March mission. A great deal of emphasis has subsequently been placed on the limited training and experience C Company had prior to the massacres. This is often cited as one of the causal factors. The company's training period before deployment was cut short by one month, however, an additional month of training was provided in Vietnam. There were two instances when this training included protocol for searching villages that took place in mock and real villages.⁴⁵ C Company did not have any direct contact with enemy forces prior to the attack on 16 March. On the other hand B Company received "intensive" training that included the "Vietnam social environment and counterinsurgency operations." They also received thorough training for handling prisoners. The Peers Report states Michles, the company leader, was

⁴³ Regarding Brooks' involvement in rape, see Thomas R. Partsch's testimony in RDAR Volume 2, Book 26, Partsch 5, 37-38. On the nature of some of 2nd Platoon's more horrible crimes in Binh Tay, see Leonard R. Gonzalez's testimony in RDAR Volume 2, Book 26, Gonzalez 19-20).

⁴⁴ RDAR Volume 1, 4-9.

⁴⁵ RDAR Volume 1, 4-5, 4-6.

considered “extremely conscientious.”⁴⁶ Despite the training B Company received, and its supposedly excellent leadership, it committed a massacre in My Hoi. From 1 January to 15 March the TF recorded 350 killed or captured enemies, but only 20 weapons captured.⁴⁷ This ratio should have been foreboding since the Army average at that point was one weapon for every three enemy combatants reported killed, but is also an indication that the horror of 16 March was probably only unique in scale, not kind.⁴⁸

The Operational Orders

The operational details for the 16 March mission were never written down, so the only record of the actual mission details has been reconstructed in the Peers Report from oral testimony. The purpose of the mission according to those who testified was to attack and destroy a large and effective People’s Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF) battalion thought to be in the region and receiving aid from the inhabitants of Son My.⁴⁹ The quality of this intelligence was suspect according to the Peers Report, but the TF was apparently not aware of this prior to the operation. The upper command of the TF did, however, become aware of this early in the morning of the attack. It became apparent that the enemy was not present in the Son My region when a military intelligence officer within C Company reported to Medina that interrogations of some inhabitants revealed the PLAF troops had left the village just prior to the American assault. Despite this discovery by men on the ground within C Company, and the report of the news to CPT Medina and higher command levels within TF Barker, including Barker himself, the attack proceeded without any alteration of orders. Furthermore, no concerns were raised among the

⁴⁶ RDAR Volume 1, 4-10.

⁴⁷ RDAR Volume 1, 4-7.

⁴⁸ Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 452.

⁴⁹ RDAR Volume 1, 2-1

commanding officers when reports of high numbers of ‘enemy kills’ were being reported without any reports of captured weapons.⁵⁰

The day before the attack COL Henderson (his first day in the role of commander of the TF) and LTC Barker stressed to the company commanders the importance of an aggressive attack on the region, and that the population consisted of little more than “VC or VC sympathizers.”⁵¹ Specifics were provided regarding the landing zones and direction of movement each company should take. According to testimony provided to the Peers Inquiry orders were given “to burn the houses, kill the livestock, destroy foodstuffs and perhaps to close the wells.”⁵² These orders were passed on to the individual companies by the company commanders (Riggs, Michles, and Medina). At least Medina conveyed the orders with an added emphasis on the mission providing an opportunity for revenge for recent casualties C Company took in the Son My region.⁵³ This is mentioned in the Peers Report, and is often cited as a pivotal detail in the narrative of the massacre conducted by C Company. The conventional narrative of the massacre stresses the frustrations of guerrilla warfare, particularly the difficulty in telling friend from foe, as an important causal factor in the massacre, thus the relative weight given to the nature of Medina’s pre-mission ‘pep talk.’ How important this detail is to explaining the massacre is questionable though: Capitan Michles is not reported to have embellished the orders in the same way, or to the same extent, at least in terms of revenge, yet B Company massacred about 100 civilians far away from C Company in My Hoi.⁵⁴ Furthermore, as the nature of some of the

⁵⁰ RDAR Volume 1, 10-27

⁵¹ RDAR Volume 1, 2-1 “VC,” short for Viet Cong, or Vietnamese Communist, was a slang term used by the South Vietnamese press and Americans to refer to PLAF members or sympathizers, or more broadly, to anyone deemed to be the enemy.

⁵² RDAR Volume 1, 2-2.

⁵³ RDAR Volume 1, 2-2.

⁵⁴ RDAR Volume 1, 8-13, 8-14.

atrocities in Son My reveal, the guerrilla warfare theory does not hold as much water as it might if this was 'just' a case of indiscriminate killing.

Significantly none of the orders contained instructions for how to deal with civilians or prisoners and the GIs were given the clear impression that any Vietnamese presence in the area at the time of the attack essentially constituted association with the enemy. The Peers Report concluded regarding LTC Barker's orders for the operation "that LTC Barker's minimal or nonexistent instructions concerning the handling of noncombatants created the potential for grave misunderstandings as to his intentions and for interpretation of his orders as authority to fire, without restriction, on all persons found in the target area."⁵⁵ On the contrary, given the nature of the mission and the absence of prisoner handling instructions, and knowing the reputation the TF had from their highly suspicious captured weapon to kill ratio, one might be inclined to think his intentions were in fact clear, if not explicitly stated.

The Operation

On the morning of the attack there were only civilians in Son My, most of whom were women, children, or elderly men. There was no sign of the PLAF or enemy weapons. Upon landing in Son My each of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Platoons of C Company began killing everyone they encountered. The 1st platoon moved east through Thuan Yen. GIs moved systematically calling inhabitants out of structures and killing them as they appeared. Inhabitants who were not killed immediately were rounded up into groups (two groups initially, up to 80 in one, and 50 in the other) and moved to the east edge of the sub-hamlet where they were guarded briefly and

⁵⁵ RDAR Volume 1, 5-9.

eventually executed en masse. There were further similar smaller incidents throughout the village of Son My. There were numerous incidents of torture and mutilation.

Many women and young girls were raped before being killed. This was nothing new for members of C Company. In fact, for some of the men, sexual violence was their primary preoccupation on such missions. Thomas Partsch of C Company described to investigators rapes that were committed by his fellow soldiers on missions. In one instance he witnessed men lining up to gang rape a young woman, but when asked about specific details he answered “I don’t know....that’s what they used to do.”⁵⁶

Although the My Lai massacre is most often cited as an example (or more often as *the* example) of wanton killing by American soldiers, it could just as easily be characterized by the extreme sexual violence perpetrated by the men of Task Force Barker. At least twenty women and girls were raped, in some cases by multiple men, in the course of four hours. Rape is usually only given a passing mention among a litany of brutal acts committed against the inhabitants of Son My. In many accounts of the massacre, rape is almost erased from the horrors of the day. In the entire *American Experience: My Lai*, a popular American PBS documentary, there is only one mention of a sexual assault, and it was made in passing about an incident that did not even occur during the attack.⁵⁷ Rarely does it receive specific attention, or is an effort made to distinguish it from other types of violence. The distinction is important, however, particularly in the way it undermines widely accepted rationalization for the violence that day. This was not a

⁵⁶ Partsch also told the Peers Inquiry that he did not think he witnessed a war crime, or anything that warranted reporting. RDAR Volume 2 Book 26, Partsch 2, 5, 12, 19. Other participants offered similar testimony. See RDAR Volume 2 Book 26, Lacroix 16-17, 45. RDAR Volume 2 Book 26, Bunning 4, 5, 6, 32-33. RDAR Volume 2 Book 26, Gonzalez 4, 17. RDAR Volume 2 Book 25, Bernhardt 122. RDAR Volume 2 Book 24, Konwinski 10.

⁵⁷ PBS *American Experience: My Lai*, Program Transcript, 2010, 9. Online: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/transcript/mylai-transcript/>. Accessed 3 January, 2014.

case of frightened GIs reacting to indistinguishable enemies in a guerrilla war.⁵⁸ Partsch's testimony, and the testimony of other men from C Company, indicates the mass raping in Son My was not out of the ordinary, but more significantly, it was not the behaviour of 'out-of-control' soldiers. On the contrary, they were very much *in* control and behaving in a manner that suggests they were in a familiar situation. Much like intentional civilian deaths, rape was not unique to Task Force Barker, or the mission in Son My. Although the incidents of sexual violence in Son My were egregious, their only marginally exceptional quality is the fact that they have been made known to the American public at all – although with little consequence.

Initially the 2nd Platoon under Stephen Brooks worked alongside Calley's platoon in Thuan Yen, killing everything as they pressed through the sub-hamlet – sometimes shooting people as they were encountered, or as they emerged from houses after being called out, other times herding together small groups to kill at once.⁵⁹ Not long after moving into Thuan Yen, Brooks's platoon regrouped and moved north to Binh Tay where they carried on in a similar fashion, killing and raping whoever they encountered. The 3rd Platoon, having landed last, followed behind the swath of destruction in Thuan Yen killing and destroying who and what remained, including at one point rounding up and killing a group of 7-12 people at once.

Company B was initially intended to provide back-up for C Company if they encountered resistance in and around Thuan Yen. Since there was no resistance, B Company was sent to a different landing zone in order to eventually attack My Hoi (see Appendix, Image 1). This is significant because, along with the fact there are no records of any radio messages reporting contact with the enemy during the entire attack, this shatters any illusions of confusion among

⁵⁸ Gina Marie Weaver, *Ideologies of Forgetting: Rape in the Vietnam War* (Albany: State of New York Press, 2010), 76.

⁵⁹ RDAR Volume 1, 6-8.

officers in command about a real battle taking place in Thuan Yen. Details are sparse, but according to several different sources members of B Company killed approximately 100 civilians in My Hoi.⁶⁰ This massacre by B Company was only discovered by American authorities during the Peers Inquiry; had a criminal investigation not been conducted the massacre in My Hoi would have gone undiscovered. It was ancillary to the atrocities (those of the 3 platoons of C Company) that Ronald Ridenhour revealed in his letter to several congressmen, high officials, and the President.

Both companies committed acts of rape, torture, and mutilation in addition to killing. There was no resistance from their victims, no enemy fire (no sniper fire as is sometimes reported), and no enemy weapons recovered from within the sub-hamlets. There were no American casualties from direct contact with the enemy (since no enemies were present) during the operation. The massacres were committed slowly, and methodically. It was not a ‘free-for-all’ and the men were not ‘out of control’ as is often suggested, but instead “business like” is among the terms used by one witness to describe their demeanour.⁶¹ When orders finally came to “stop the killing” the men had little difficulty complying.⁶² Furthermore, many of the men have testified that the outcome (specifics aside) was predictable.⁶³ The mass slaughter of groups of civilians was not committed haphazardly, and was not conducted by one group of soldiers, but instead occurred several times involving trips back into the sub-hamlet to retrieve more victims, and was simultaneously carried out by the 1st Platoon with some help from the 2nd Platoon within Thuan Yen. There were, to be sure, additional ‘haphazard’ killings of individuals and smaller

⁶⁰ RDAR Volume 1, 7-1, 7-2.

⁶¹ RDAR Volume 2 Testimony, Book 11, Haeberle 73.

⁶² RDAR Volume 2 Testimony, Book 26, Gonzalez 21-25, Partsch 2.

⁶³ RDAR Volume 1, 5-14, 5-15. See specifically William Calvin Lloyd, Robert Wayne Pendelton, James Robert Berghold.

groups throughout the morning as the more coordinated effort to ‘kill everything’ was being conducted, but this was just more of the same except on a smaller scale.⁶⁴ This was no spontaneous burst of rage that could not have been anticipated or controlled. It was anticipated by a number of the GIs who testified to the Peers Inquiry, and there is little reason to doubt it was condoned by commanding officers of TF Barker.

There has been a huge variation on the number of Vietnamese deaths in Son My throughout American historiography of the war. This is one of the more obvious signs of the sort of “errors of inattention” that is apparent in much of the writing on the subject outside of scholarship specifically focused on the massacres. The Peers Report is quite clear on this point. It does offer different estimates, but each estimate is clearly qualified. For example, it cites 175-200 deaths in the Summary Report, but adds that this estimate was based “solely on the... statements and testimony of US personnel” and does not include the killings committed by B Company. In fact, the report clearly states this estimate is almost certainly very low. It also cites the Criminal Investigation Division (CID) estimate of 347, but adds that the CID report indicates that this number is based on census data for Thuan Yen. It only includes those who were registered inhabitants of the sub-hamlet. It does not include people who may have been visiting or passing through Thuan Yen at the time of the attack, nor does it include the death of those who lived in other sub-hamlets such as Binh Tay, or My Hoi. Every time the Report cites these numbers it states they are very conservative estimates.⁶⁵ The closest the Report comes to a conclusive figure is a CID estimate that “may have exceeded 400” for the overall Son My

⁶⁴ Variations on the instructions to ‘Kill everything’ have been attributed to Capitan Medina by a number of his men in their sworn testimony to the Peers Inquiry. Nick Turse, *Kill Anything that Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2013), 2.

⁶⁵ RDAR Volume 1, 2-3, 2-7, 2-8, 6-19, 6-19.

Village.⁶⁶ These are all based on American sources; there have been Vietnamese estimates available to the American public since the story broke. The Son My Village Chief reported 567 deaths throughout the village at the time of the attack.⁶⁷ A survey of some American texts reveals that most writers either cite various estimates from the Peers Report without their qualifications, or apparently make up their own estimates. For example, George Herring's classic text, *America's Longest War*, cites "more than 200 civilians." Stanley Karnow could not decide between "more than three hundred" and "a hundred." The CID estimate of 347 seems to have made an impression with a number of writers. Gerard J. DeGroot puts the figure at "some 350," whereas Joe Allen estimated "more than 350." Robert Mann decided on "more than 300," but oddly in the sentence immediately before this refers to a *New York Times* story that cites 567 according to Vietnamese sources. Andrew Rawson settles on the conservative estimate of "around 200." Tom Pendergast acknowledges the discrepancies in estimates and attempts to offer a balanced textbook account by writing that "estimates vary from as low as 128 to as high as 504."⁶⁸ But what responsible source ever estimated 128? This is the fabricated number of enemy kills the Task Force reported after the mission. Also curious is his choice for the upper limit of estimates (especially considering his willingness to accept 128 as the low end) of 504 instead of the readily available estimate of 567. In many cases it is impossible to determine where the authors found their evidence. The memorial for the massacres in Son My has the

⁶⁶ RDAR Volume 1, 2-3.

⁶⁷ Henry Kamm, "Vietnamese Say G.I.'s Slew 567 in Town" *New York Times* 17 November, 1969, 1. In 22 March, 1968 report, Do Dinh Luyen (Son My Village Chief) claimed 570 deaths (480 in Tu Cung hamlet, and 90 in Co Luy). RDAR Volume 1, 10-43.

⁶⁸ George Herring, *America's Longest War: the United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 212; Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 468, 530; Gerald J. DeGroot, *A Noble Cause? America and the Vietnam War*, 295; Joe Allen, *Vietnam: The (Last) War the U.S. Lost* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008), 48; Robert Mann, *A Grand Delusion: America's Descent into Vietnam* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 649; Andrew Rawson, *The Vietnam War Handbook: US Armed Forces in Vietnam* (Stroud: History Press, 2008), 173. Tom Pendergast, *The Vietnam War, Defining Moments Series* (Detroit: Omnigraphics, 2007), 88.

names of 504 people who died in the village on 16 March inscribed on it. This seems like a reasonable place to start. It may seem somewhat trivial – even callous – to dwell on such details, however, it is the general trend that is of interest, rather than the actual numbers themselves; there is a widespread tendency to rely on the low end of estimates in the Peers Report, even though the report itself effectively discredits the lower estimates.⁶⁹ Of course the gravity of the massacres cannot be adequately expressed simply by getting the numbers right. On the other hand, it is hard to understand what might cause such errors to be so prevalent, and it is worth consideration for this question, rather than to suggest there has been an inadequate quantification of the misery inflicted.

Air Traffic

During the attack there were many aircraft circling above Tu Cung hamlet and directly over Thuan Yen – some were command helicopters, others were observation craft, still others were gunships. The airspace was so congested that some of the air units had to reposition their orbits away from the ‘My Lai 4’ area to avoid a potential accident.⁷⁰ There were also widespread radio communications as was standard during an operation of this sort. Among the aircraft circling above Son My that day were helicopters containing Barker and Henderson. Soldiers testified that Barker’s command helicopter was in its usual position during such attacks, and low enough that he could be recognized.⁷¹ Their command helicopters were over the action

⁶⁹ Nicholas Turse makes the same point in his 2005 dissertation. He also offers an expanded survey of additional American texts that favour low estimates. Nicholas Turse, “‘Kill Anything That Moves’: U.S. War Crimes and Atrocities in Vietnam, 1965-1973” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2005) 181-185. Interestingly, Mark Taylor offers a slightly different take on these estimates claiming that when the high end estimates (504-570) are cited in relation to “My Lai” they serve to further erase the massacre in My Hoi from the mnemonic record. Mark J. Taylor, “The Massacre at My Khe 4: A Different Story” 7-9.

⁷⁰ RDAR Volume 1, 6-3.

⁷¹ RDAR Volume 2, Testimony Book 26, Parts 9, 10, 15-16.

as it unfolded for most of the morning for the purpose of receiving radio communications from the ground and sending back orders. Regarding the nature of radio communications during battle in the Vietnam War Philip Beidler, a Vietnam veteran with frontline experience, wrote the following:

“[E]veryone... from the division near a radio in the immediate vicinity could not *not* have heard about what was going on, listening on innumerable handsets and headsets or monitoring the speakers filling every command bunker and radio room within miles. There are a lot of things a person remembers about combat in Vietnam. One of the most unforgettable is the cacophonous rush... of nonstop radio traffic. Especially in combat, everybody is trying to talk to everybody else. Everybody carrying an infantry radio on the ground or riding a tank or armored personnel carrier hears it; artillery support people hear it; helicopter pilots and door gunners hear it; tactical operations center headquarters duty officers, NCOs, and enlisted staff hear it; orderly room clerks hear it. One may surmise that hundreds of people heard something about what was happening at My Lai that morning while it was happening.”⁷²

The details in the Peers Report regarding the level of command presence in and over the village during the attack led one former U.S. Army counterintelligence officer to describe C Company’s mission in Thuan Yen as the one of the most supervised in American military history.⁷³

Also among the aircraft was a scout helicopter piloted by Hugh Thompson. It was clear to Thompson that there was a massacre taking place and civilians were being intentionally killed. He landed his helicopter, had a verbal altercation with a GI (probably Brooks, although Thompson initially thought it was Calley) on the ground and assisted some of the surviving civilians while ordering his co-pilot to shoot any threatening U.S. soldiers. Among C Company members it was rumoured that Thompson’s outrage expressed over the radio prompted Medina and those above him to change the nature of the operation and order the killing to stop.⁷⁴

⁷² Philip Beidler, “Calley’s Ghost,” *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, winter 2003, 30-50. This is further supported by testimony from other airmen who were over Son My who “heard the terms ‘killing’ and ‘murder’ used freely.” RDAR Volume 1, 2-4, 2-5.

⁷³ Lawrence R. Rockwood, “The Lesson Avoided: The Official Legacy of the My Lai Massacre” in *The Moral Dimension of Asymmetrical Warfare Counter-terrorism, Democratic Values and Military Ethics*, edited by Th.A. van Baarda and D.E.M. Verweij (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 2009), 183.

⁷⁴ RDAR Volume 2, Testimony Book 26, Parts 27, 28.

Thompson filed a report of what he witnessed but little was done as a result. This was the story as he told it after the massacre, however, he changed his story when he was interrogated by the House Armed Services Investigating Subcommittee into the “My Lai Incident.” To the investigating panel he denied seeing any killing, only bodies, and also denied ordering his helicopter crew to train their guns on American soldiers.⁷⁵

At the end of the day the enemy combatant casualty count reported by TF Barker (all three companies) was 128 killed, with three weapons captured. The numbers were of course total fabrications. Again, the fact that the abysmal ratio of captured weapons to enemies killed was not an immediate cause for alarm is suggestive of a much larger systemic problem. This information was reported by two men from the 31st Public Information Detachment who were embedded with C Company during the operation. Jay Roberts knowingly fabricated the story despite having witnessed many of the murders, and Ronald Haeberle photographed the operation. Haeberle’s name is now well-known in association with the massacre and he is often erroneously credited with helping to uncover it due to his sale of his personal photographs to *Life* magazine – eighteen months after the massacre, and after the story had already become national news. In fact, he actively assisted in the cover-up by concealing the photographs he took with his personal camera which was the only camera he used for photographing scenes of atrocities. Many years later he admitted in an interview that he had taken some photographs that depicted American soldiers during the act of killing, but destroyed them before anyone else could see them.⁷⁶ He purposefully censored the photographs he took with the official Army camera, being careful not

⁷⁵ Committee on the Armed Service House of Representatives, “Investigation of the My Lai Incident,” Hearings, April – June, 1970. Testimony of Lt. Hugh C. Thompson, Jr, 226, 230-234.

⁷⁶ Evelyn Theiss, “My Lai photographer Ron Haeberle admits he destroyed pictures of soldiers in the act of killing” Cleveland.com, 20 November, 2009. Online: http://blog.cleveland.com/pdextra/2009/11/post_25.html. Accessed 10 October, 2012.

to photograph evidence of atrocities. The Peers Report made a specific note of the fact that Roberts and Haerberle were under separate command from TF Barker, and as such, “in contrast to the other enlisted personnel in My Lai (4) that day, they were in a position to report what they had seen without the same fear of retaliation.” Neither of them did.⁷⁷

Military officials up to the divisional level of command knew there were a large number of civilian casualties during the operation, yet as the Peers Inquiry discovered, “at every command level from company to division, actions were taken or omitted which together effectively concealed from higher headquarters the events.”⁷⁸ The attempt to conceal the massacres extended beyond the division as well. As already noted, the Public Information Detachment operating with C Company also withheld evidence and falsified reports, even after they had rotated out of South Vietnam. When Thompson and other aviation crew reported what they saw to their commanders within the 123rd Aviation Battalion nothing was done to investigate the reports despite the fact that senior level officers in the battalion later testified that they knew the reports to be true.⁷⁹ Nothing much was done about the existing evidence of atrocities except to minimize, distort, and hide it, until Ronald Ridenhour’s 29 March, 1969 letter to the President, Secretary of Defence, and other high civilian officials. By September 1969 charges had been laid against Calley, and eventually several other officers and enlisted men.

There are several significant points in this narrative. The operation consisted of hundreds of American soldiers from three different companies. There were at least three distinct large-scale massacres that took place. The massacres were controlled in nature and not all committed by the same platoon. The middle and upper command was aware of what was happening during

⁷⁷ RDAR Volume 1, 11-8.

⁷⁸ RDAR Volume 1, 11-1.

⁷⁹ RDAR Volume 1, 11-11.

and after it took place, and it is quite likely that many other people knew something of it as well. Officers throughout the ranks of the TF had good evidence that there were no enemy soldiers in the village as the attack commenced. Additionally, Calley, the murdering rapist that he proved to be, was not responsible for the overall massacre by any stretch of the imagination.⁸⁰ He was not even in the vicinity of a couple hundred of the murders, nor were they committed by men under his command. Roberts and Haeberle, two men who did not have to answer to the Americal command, and who witnessed the massacre, willfully assisted in the cover-up. Haeberle later profited from it. Furthermore most of the evidence including all of the testimony of those involved has been neatly compiled into a very readable report that is often praised by historians and journalists who have written about Son My in depth.⁸¹ This report has been available to the public since the early 1970s. Again, these are important points, and they have been made by numerous authors individually, or even all together. They are not particularly original observations. They demonstrate clearly that the problem in Son My that day in 1968 was not a matter of specific conditions in one particular village or sub-hamlet, nor of C Company's particular history. It was not a matter of personalities, particular character flaws, or insufficient leadership skills – certainly not at the platoon or company level. It is also likely that knowledge of the massacre extended far beyond the men directly involved, even possibly while it was

⁸⁰ Calley is sometimes thought to have refrained from sexual violence because he vehemently claimed so in his memoirs and in his testimony before the Peers Inquiry. However, it is worth noting that none of the soldiers who testified admitted to committing rape. There are a few men from C Company who testified that Calley was a regular participant in sexual assaults. For example, see Michael Bernhardt quoted in Christian Appy, *Vietnam: The Definitive Oral History Told from All Sides* (London: Ebury, 2006), 351; RDAR Volume 2, Book 26, Partsch-38.

⁸¹ See Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 4. Nicholas Turse “‘Kill Anything That Moves’: U.S. War Crimes and Atrocities in Vietnam, 1965-1973” 10. The report has also been published unabridged with related legal commentary: Joseph Goldstein, Burke Marshall, and Jack Schwartz, *The My Lai Massacre and its Cover-up: Beyond the Reach of Law? The Peers Commission Report with a Supplement and Introductory Essay on the Limits of Law*.

occurring, yet for some reason only two men thought it was worth reporting – Hugh Thompson, the helicopter pilot who also intervened in the massacre, and later Ronald Ridenhour.

According to the conventional My Lai Massacre narrative, the men were “frustrated by fighting against guerrillas.”⁸² They were disoriented and acting without their full cognitive faculties; they simply “were out of control.”⁸³ They could not distinguish friend from foe, which “provided the backdrop for the...massacre.”⁸⁴ They killed because they were following orders from Calley and Medina.⁸⁵ There was a lack of good leadership and they had not received adequate training in the laws of war, or in the treatment of prisoners.⁸⁶ Atrocities are a normal, if unfortunate, part of war and the My Lai Massacre is merely one of countless similar or worse acts committed by other armies throughout history.⁸⁷ These pat explanations and rationalizations only survive because there is not enough analysis and consideration of the actual events and the types of violence committed in Son My by the Americal Division. The nature of the violence and the disposition of many of the men who acted it out sharply discredits these explanations for the massacre. Too much rape, too much glee, too much torture and mutilation – too many signs that too many men were enjoying themselves are documented. Patsch’s testimony of the frequency of, and attitude towards rape is a case in point. Fred Widmer is one of the few soldiers who has granted interviews and participated in documentaries about the massacres. He speaks

⁸² Kevin O’Reily, “Putting Students in ‘Their Shoes’: A Decision-Making Approach to Teaching the Vietnam War” in *Understanding and Teaching the Vietnam War* ed. John Day Tully, Matthew Masur and Brad Austin (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013), 53.

⁸³ Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, *Vietnam: Echoes from the Wall – Teachers’ Guide* (Washington D.C.: Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, 1999), 38; PBS American Experience: My Lai, Program Transcript, 2010, 13. Online: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/transcript/mylai-transcript/>. Accessed 3 January, 2014.

⁸⁴ Sally Smith, “My Lai” in *Dictionary of the Vietnam War*, ed. James S. Olson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 293.

⁸⁵ PBS American Experience: My Lai, Program Transcript, 2010, 14.

⁸⁶ B.G. Burkett and Glenna Whitley, *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation Was Robbed of its Heroes and its History*, 116.

⁸⁷ Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, *Vietnam: Echoes from the Wall – Teachers’ Guide*, 39-40.

with great remorse, but also self-righteousness. “I have no shame,” he insists, claiming it was a simple matter of following orders. This is the same man whose fellow GIs testified that he took particular enjoyment in killing, and exhibited voyeuristic interest in gruesomely murdered Vietnamese victims by photographing them.⁸⁸ Dean Fields of C Company, Second Platoon, described the demeanor of the men doing the killing as “having a ball.” When asked to explain himself he said “They didn’t look like they hated to do it... I know for a fact they didn’t hate to do it.... That’s the whole platoon.”⁸⁹ These are the realities of the massacres that tend to be glossed over in facile arguments about following orders, or ambiguous situations. This was not a matter of obedience to authority as is suggested by the application of Stanley Milgram’s or Philip Zimbardo’s theories to My Lai.⁹⁰ Nor was this simply a case of a spontaneous eruption of vengeance. The massive discrepancy between reported enemy casualties and weapons captured prior to the Son My raid is a strong indicator that the same attitudes and behaviours on display that day were established and displayed before 16 March. The men did not learn how to rape, torture, and kill civilians while in Son My; nor was their leadership oblivious to their ability to do so; they just did not care.⁹¹

⁸⁸ RDAR Volume 2, Book 25, Stanley 14. Book 24, Carter 37.

⁸⁹ RDAR Volume 2, Book 26, Fields 21. Fields was only referring to his own platoon, but the same disposition was exhibited throughout the Task Force. For example, Widmer was in First Platoon.

⁹⁰ Some people have sought answers for what happened in Son My in the so-called obedience experiments of Milgram and Zimbardo. Herbert C. Kelman and Lee H. Lawrence, “Assignment of Responsibility in the Case of Lt. Calley: Preliminary Report on a National Survey,” *Journal of Social Issues* 28 no.1 (1972): 177-212. A 1973 CBS television drama, “The Tenth Level,” aired in the wake of Calley’s trial, drew parallels between a dramatization of the obedience experiments and the atrocities at Son My. John J. O’Connor, “TV: Punishment and Reality of War Dramatized” *New York Times* 26 August, 1976, 51. Philip Zimbardo uses My Lai as a means for demonstrating the results of his Stanford Prison Experiment in *The Lucifer Effect: How Good People Turn Evil* (London: Rider, 2007). Stanley Milgram also cited My Lai in support of his conclusions regarding obedience to authority in *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 183.

⁹¹ There is ample evidence suggesting senior leadership at the company and brigade levels of multiple divisions operating in the northern provinces following the Tet Offensive was aware of serious atrocities taking place. The Peers Report indicated the development of “a permissive attitude towards the treatment and safeguarding of noncombatants” within the 11th Brigade of Americal. RDAR Volume 1, 12-1. A month prior to the Son My massacres a smaller massacre was committed by B Company of 35th Infantry, 4th Division in Quang Nam province, just north of Quang Ngai. The Army was made aware of it as early as September 1968 and essentially ignored the

One of the first questions that arose after news of the massacre became widespread was whether such behaviour was representative of American war fighting in Vietnam, or was it an isolated incident; if this atrocity was hidden for over a year, was it possible that other massacres had gone undiscovered? This question plagued the country during the initial revelation of the massacre and during Calley's trial. Louis Harris and Associates revealed that over eighty-one percent of those polled nationally in 1971 thought there had been other "incidents" similar to those in 'My Lai' in which Americans had been involved.⁹² Yet it appears this was little more than an abstract idea for most of the respondents, or perhaps this belief was untethered from any notion of command responsibility. A Louis Harris national poll conducted with *Time* magazine indicated that sixty-five percent of the 1608 households asked thought "incidents such as this are bound to happen in war."⁹³ A smaller national survey conducted by the *Wall Street Journal* immediately following revelations of an atrocity in Son My revealed a similar trend.⁹⁴ If the massacre was symptomatic of anything, it seems the majority of Americans were willing to look more broadly, to war in general. Over time when the discussion was confined to the nature of the specific war at hand, it was easier to narrow culpability to Calley and a few bad men. The limited scope of the legal proceeding of Calley's trial made this easier, as did the fear, however unreasonable, of painting GIs with too broad a brush. It was simply easier to come to terms with

case. Deborah Nelson, *The War Behind Me: Vietnam Veterans Confront the Truth About War Crimes* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 12-15. There was also in place a set of policies and working assumptions that essentially eliminated any reason to investigate lopsided ratios of enemies kills to weapons captured (a sign of civilian deaths even Guenter Lewy openly acknowledged in *America in Vietnam*, 142): Mark J. Taylor, "The Massacre at My Khe 4: A Different Story" 5.

⁹² Question R17A, Louis Harris and Associates, poll of national adult sample February 1971. As cited in Patrick Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials, and the Politics of Healing* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 59.

⁹³ "A Time-Louis Harris Poll: The War: New Support for Nixon" *Time* 12 January, 1970.

⁹⁴ "Assessing Songmy [sic]: Doves Recoil by Hawks Tend to See 'Massacre' as Just a Part of War" *Wall Street Journal* 1 December, 1969, 1.

the mistakes of a few bad men instead of acknowledging the immorality of the war or worse, rescinding the country's self-image as a virtuous nation. The result of this national denial was the erosion of any chance of a proper accounting of, and reconciliation for, the massacres.

Details from the Peers Inquiry clearly show that the actions of Calley's platoon were only one aspect of a much larger multi-company Task Force operation. Subsequent research has shown, too, that Task Force Barker was but a small component of a province-wide operation that was decimating the civilian population. This was not totally unknown at the time the massacre was revealed, but it received very little attention in the mainstream press. The guerrilla warfare narrative posited in so many accounts of the massacres that has frustrated American soldiers scared, hurt, and fighting blind is a micro view. The official macro response to guerrilla warfare was unrestricted high technology firepower aimed at the Vietnamese people, and it was responsible for hundreds of thousands of civilian casualties. The massacres in Son My were in keeping with this general theme, and were accommodated at the highest levels by presumptions that excused otherwise inexplicable combat results such as massive discrepancies in enemy casualties and captured weapons or prisoners. Furthermore, there was a tendency to apportion blame for civilian deaths to the victims. According to General Westmoreland's logic, the civilians in Son My were partially responsible for their own slaughter for resisting relocation.⁹⁵ Later in a 1974 documentary titled *Hearts and Minds*, Westmoreland offered a more philosophical rationalization for the way the war was waged by America. In an amazing display of irony and ignorance he said, "Well the Oriental doesn't put the same high price on life as the Westerner. Life is plentiful, Life is cheap in the Orient. And as the Philosophy of the Orient expresses it, life is not important."⁹⁶ This was a personal and intimate (and painfully distraught)

⁹⁵ David Hunt, "Dirty Wars: Counterinsurgency in Vietnam and Today" *Politics Society* 38-1 (2010), 39.

⁹⁶ William Westmoreland in *Hearts and Minds* directed by Peter Davis, (New York: Janus Films, 1974).

admission from the commander of all U.S. military operations in Vietnam from 1964 to 1968. The Peers Report notes that in the aftermath of the Tet Offensive, Westmoreland temporarily loosened restrictions on the Rules of Engagement for American forces, particularly as they related to Vietnamese civilians. Furthermore, during this period some commanders in the region were given permission to use “weapons and force most appropriate to insure prompt restriction of the enemy.”⁹⁷ It was generally understood that commanding officers could operate any way they chose without fear of sanctions. The Son My massacres are only one expression of such a mentality.

Despite this, the My Lai Massacre was largely (and still is mostly) attributed to C Company – in fact even more narrowly, to ‘Calley and his men’ of the 1st Platoon.⁹⁸ Their actions came to define the massacre in later histories and public memory because their actions were the focus of most of the press’s and public’s attention. This narrow view of events presents a couple of problems. First, it tends to stipulate the definition of the massacre to some very specific events, such as the gathering of dozens of people together for mass executions “like a Nazi-type thing” as one participant put it.⁹⁹ This emphasizes the particular and likely unique aspects of the events. Second, (and somewhat contradictory to the first point) if the First Platoon’s actions constitute ‘the massacre,’ one does not have to look far to find traces of similar atrocities committed by American troops. The civilian population of My Hoi, about four kilometres away from Thuan Yen was decimated by B Company on the same day, yet it has not

⁹⁷ RDAR Volume 1, 8-5; 9-7.

⁹⁸ ‘Calley and his men’ or some such similar phrase can be found throughout scholarly survey texts on the war as well as more popular sources. For example James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell*, 228; B.G. Burkett and Glenna Whitley, *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation Was Robbed of its Heroes and its History*, 115; Charles DeBenedetti, Charles Chatfield, assisting author, *An American Ordeal: The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam Era* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 265.

⁹⁹ Michael Terry, a member of 3rd Platoon C Company, in an interview by Seymour Hersh. Hersh, “Hamlet Attack Called ‘Point-Blank Murder’” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 20 November, 1069, 1.

registered in American memory, and barely makes an appearance in any of the hundreds of surveys of the war. It is also unclear in many accounts if the actions of the 2nd Platoon in Binh Tay are included. Emphasizing the outrageous actions of one company or platoon and ignoring or marginalizing the atrocities of another lend an exceptional character to the ordeal (which I will address further in chapter three).

There is no doubt Calley committed horrible acts for which he deserves to face serious consequences. By almost all accounts Calley was a weak platoon leader – uncharismatic, disliked, and disrespected by most of his platoon. Given the full scope of details from the attack on Son My it should seem rather bizarre that he has been weeded out and made the focus of so much attention regarding the massacre. Granted he was at the centre of a great deal of the coordinated murders of the first platoon. Yet to read various accounts offered by his peers of his leadership style, his personality, and his lackluster authoritative influence, it is hard to imagine he was effectively much more than a participant, albeit a motivated and eager one. Of course his very public trial is mostly to blame for the attention he received – dragging the story out much longer than the typical news cycle would normally accommodate. This prompted another central question about the massacre in public discourse: was Calley responsible or was he a scapegoat for guilty parties further up the ranks in the Army; where exactly did guilt lie?¹⁰⁰ (There is more to be said about isolating Calley in this ordeal - particularly in the way it encourages an exceptionalist interpretation of the massacre – which I will address in chapter three.) Much has

¹⁰⁰ For some examples of the contemporary debate in the press see Robert D. McFadden “Calley Verdict Brings Home the Anguish of War to Public” *New York Times*, 4 April, 1971, 56. “War and Guilt” *Wall Street Journal*, 31 March, 1971, 14. “The Clamour Over Calley: Who Shares the Guilt?” *Time*, 12 April 1971. William F. Buckley, “My Lai: Whose Fault,” *European Stars and Stripes*, December 13, 1969, 13. For an extended discussion of public perception of Calley and the ‘assignment of responsibility’ based on a national survey see Herbert C. Kelman and Lee H. Lawrence, “Assignment of Responsibility in the Case of Lt. Calley: Preliminary Report on a National Survey,” 177-212.

been made about the coming together of so-called ‘hawks’ and ‘doves’ in support of Calley. A lone soldier at the centre of the massacre highlighted the question of culpability and encouraged a false dichotomy regarding responsibility. The misguided debate that it fueled served to heap an unwarranted amount of attention on the issue of apportioning blame for the massacre. It also re-centred attention on an American, and the story was increasingly about American victimization. Calley certainly agreed: “there were many victims of the war” he told a television interviewer in 1975, but the American people “were the greatest victims.”¹⁰¹ In retrospect the thought that Calley of all people could somehow take on the status of victim foreshadows the way the nation eventually began to think about the war. Although he was central to the contemporary discussion of the massacre, Calley’s role is essentially a red herring; there is little point in continuing a debate about the burden of responsibility he should carry because it has received more than its share of attention and has distracted attention from more important matters for too long. A more interesting question is why has a simplistic rendition of the massacre, with Calley in the centre of the story, persisted in American history and memory? There has been ample opportunity for correctives in the thousands of texts on the war, yet in the most popular and influential of these he remains at the centre of the story.¹⁰²

The focal points of national attention are indicative of the way in which the massacre was worked into the contemporary competing narratives of the war. The corollary of this was that a

¹⁰¹ “Calley Says Americans Were Vietnam ‘Victims’” *New York Times*, 9 January, 1975, 12. Calley considered himself as a POW.

¹⁰² Frequently in surveys of the war the massacre is only touched on, however, Calley’s name is almost invariably included. For example, see George Herring, *America’s Longest War: the United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 212, 236. Herring offers two sentences on the subject, Calley’s name is in both. Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 24, 468, 530, 600: the massacre appears in four sentences on separate pages throughout the book, including a reference to Calley’s conviction, but no further explanation of the massacre in order for a reader to make any sense of the conviction. James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell*, 228: Olson and Roberts offer a much more detailed account of the massacre than others listed here, but also emphasize and as a result exaggerate Calley’s role. See chapter three for further analysis of these and other examples.

good deal of emphasis was placed on the *debate about the massacre* (or rather the debate about where blame should be apportioned) in America, rather than the actual massacre and its true victims. Discussing the massacre became an occasion to discuss the divisiveness of the war. This has had an interesting influence on the way narratives of the massacre have been written and the way the massacre has been incorporated into the larger American narratives of the Vietnam War by historians. That there are Vietnamese victims who deserve recognition, let alone reparations, was never the subject of a national discussion. Not surprisingly, silence on this subject has persisted and has been a reoccurring characteristic of America's memory of the whole war. In 1977 President Jimmy Carter unashamedly stated America had no moral debt to Vietnam from the war because the "destruction was mutual."¹⁰³ The statement was surprising enough in itself, but the absence of any sign in the mainstream press of outrage to it by Americans, or even much discussion in America is a sign of the cultural climate in which a real discussion of responsibility for the massacre could dissolve into meaningless recriminations, followed by platitudes about 'healing.'¹⁰⁴

In order to explore the ways the massacre has been narrativized within the war, and the relationship of these ways to the sensibilities responsible for various interpretations of the war, a step back from the massacre is required. An examination of the origins of various interpretive models for the Vietnam War allows for a more thorough explanation of the various ways in which the massacre has been worked into narratives of the Vietnam War (or emplotted), given

¹⁰³ "Carter: 'Nothing but Sympathy for Families' of MIAs" *The Washington Post*, 25 March, 1977, A12.

¹⁰⁴ Noam Chomsky also commented on the lack of public outcry to Carter's statement. Noam Chomsky, "Visions of Righteousness" in *The Vietnam War and American Culture* eds. John Carlos Rowe and Rick Berg (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 21.

meaning, and put to use as a memory.¹⁰⁵ The relationships between the array of interpretations of the war and the massacre and broader liberal and conservative sensibilities are also illuminated by such an examination.

¹⁰⁵ The term 'emplotment' is most often associated with Hayden White. For example, see Hayden White, "The Historical text as Literary Artifact," in *The History and Narrative Reader* Geoffrey Roberts ed., (London: Routledge, 2001), 221-236.

CHAPTER 2

CONSERVATIVES AND THE MY LAI MASSACRE

The historiographical and popular understandings of the war are often roughly characterized as extensions of the contemporary prowar ‘hawk’ and antiwar ‘dove’ positions. The continuing popular and scholarly debate in America about the origins and execution of America’s war in Vietnam is broadly split into two camps. The ‘orthodox’ historiography of the war is generally considered to represent the antiwar position, and ‘revisionist’ work represents a continuation of the hawkish position. Gary Hess (self-described as subscribing to the orthodox school of thought) begins the preface of his survey text *Vietnam: Explaining America’s Lost War* by stating the “differences between hawks and doves of the war years have continued...with revisionists carrying forward the [hawkish] ‘winnable’ war argument and orthodox writers following the dovish ‘unwinnable’ war tradition.”¹⁰⁶ From a different perspective Mark Moyar (a proud revisionist) explains that since “huge numbers of antiwar Americans entered academia and the media” during and after the war, “big academia and big media remain wedded to the tenets of the Vietnam era antiwar movement.”¹⁰⁷ “Antiwar history” has become the orthodoxy, whereas according to Moyar it was not until later that some veterans and historians opposed to antiwar rhetoric formed the basis of a revisionist school. (For now I will pass over Moyar’s implication that veterans of the war were naturally supportive of it, accepting his more fundamental point that hawks are behind the revision of the war’s history.) This equation of dove with orthodoxy and hawk with revisionism (in respect to the Vietnam War) is a simplification, but it serves as a

¹⁰⁶ Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America’s Lost War*, ix, x.

¹⁰⁷ Mark Moyar, “Vietnam: Historians at War” US Army Research, Paper 33, 2008 1. <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/usarmyresearch/33> accessed 4 November, 2013. Mark Moyar, “Vietnam: An Overview with Mark Moyar,” Hillsdale College, Hillsdale 9 September, 2007. Online: http://fora.tv/2007/09/09/Vietnam_An_Overview_with_Mark_Moyar. Accessed 20 January, 2014.

useful starting point as it is a common starting point from which a number of writers begin their arguments. The terms ‘hawk’ and ‘dove’ do not have clear definitions – particularly the latter. Just as there was some variation in the antiwar and pro-war positions during the war, there are also variations within both sides of the current debate; these positions were not, and are not monolithic.

At the heart of the debate over explaining the war in Vietnam Hess places the question: was it “a ‘necessary’ or ‘mistaken’ war?” The orthodox interpretation holds that the war was a mistake for various reasons. Hess himself characterized the war as a “hopeless enterprise.”¹⁰⁸ Some of the early liberal critics of the war explained the war in terms of a mistake or accident. George Kennan, speaking to U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, called the war “unfortunate,” said containment and the domino theory were faultily applied to Vietnam, victory was likely impossible, and the whole endeavour was a distraction from issues and regions of greater strategic importance.¹⁰⁹ Arthur Schlesinger Jr. described the war as the result of the “politics of inadvertence,” by which he meant the course of the war was not the result of “deliberate consideration,” but instead was the outcome of a series of discrete decisions that amounted to a ‘quagmire.’ As a result Schlesinger thought the responsibility was diffuse and the “tragedy” of the war was one “without villains.”¹¹⁰ Much later Robert McNamara’s confessions in *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, offered a kind of authoritative corroboration of the honest mistakes argument. Regarding the Kennedy and Johnson administrations’ decisions that led to war he wrote “We were wrong, terribly wrong.” Yet he

¹⁰⁸ Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America’s Lost War*, ix, x.

¹⁰⁹ United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, in *The Vietnam Hearings*, ed. J. William Fulbright (New York: Random House, 1966), 108-9

¹¹⁰ Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. *The Bitter Heritage: Vietnam and American Democracy, 1941-1966* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), 37-38.

added, “I truly believe we made an error not of values and intentions but of judgements and capabilities.”¹¹¹ Various mixtures of mistakes, miscalculations, interpretive errors, misunderstandings, and incoordination make up the basis of the mainstream of the orthodox history of the war. There is of course much more to the arguments of orthodox historians, and there is certainly variation within the school of thought, but one of the principle tenets to draw from the body of work is the idea that the war was a series of mistakes. American historians and writers who consider themselves, or are considered by their peers, to represent the orthodox position have called American involvement befuddled, bumbling, or some variation of a hopeless enterprise. Most frequently though the war (and the My Lai Massacre) is referred to as a tragedy. Thus this historical interpretation is suggestive of a catharsis which presumably can be found in the so-called ‘lessons of Vietnam.’ What catharsis is to have come of this tragedy has been the subject of much debate.

Revisionists of the Vietnam War uphold the ‘necessary war’ thesis. Trumpeting the conservative ethos of linking Vietnam War revisionism with patriotism (a point I will address further later), Mark Moyar stated to a Hillsdale College audience that the revisionist project has primarily been driven by the “slandering of Vietnam veterans” he attributes to the current “bias and shoddy character” of the liberal orthodoxy.¹¹² Moyar and his ilk argue that the Vietnam War was a ‘noble cause,’ but mistakenly executed – a war fought for the right reason the wrong way. As he puts it, “a wise war fought under foolish restraints.”¹¹³ Mistakes factor into the

¹¹¹ Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), xx. The significance of McNamara’s clarification to the ethics of the most prominent orthodox readings of the war has also been noted by Kendrick Oliver in “Towards a New Moral History of the Vietnam War?” 757-8.

¹¹² Mark Moyar, “Vietnam: An Overview with Mark Moyar,” Hillsdale College, Hillsdale 9 September, 2007. Online: http://fora.tv/2007/09/09/Vietnam_An_Overview_with_Mark_Moyar. Accessed 20 January, 2014. On the matter of the necessity of the war also see Michal Lind, *Vietnam: The Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America’s Most Disastrous Military Conflict* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999)

¹¹³ Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War 1954-1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 416.

revisionists' arguments too, but they are of a different variety than those emphasised by the orthodoxy. Instead of mistakes about the validity of Cold War containment policy in Indochina, or Vietnamese history and the legitimacy of the South Vietnamese government, or the nature of 'global communism' – instead of mistakes about the reasoning for war – revisionists mostly argue the reasons were sound, but strategic and tactical military mistakes were made. They often also argue that the American press and antiwar movement sabotaged the war effort by misrepresenting the war as immoral and turning the wider public (and therefore politicians) against it.¹¹⁴ Revisionists therefore mostly believe the war was winnable (and worth winning) with the right strategy and the unreserved support of the population and the media.¹¹⁵ They also place a good deal of blame at the feet of politicians and civilian military command, particularly from President Lyndon Johnson's administration, for supposedly restricting the military's ability to wage a war it could win.¹¹⁶

Orthodox scholarship has not remained unaffected by revisionist challenges. In fact, there has been a significant shift in the focus of such work. Vietnam War historian David Hunt situates one such shift following Guenter Lewy's book in which he addressed accusations of war crimes leveled against the U.S., and offered a sound, if overly legalistic, defence of American tactics.¹¹⁷ Following Lewy's book "the war crimes debate receded from view" and there was less emphasis placed on My Lai because there was less emphasis on war crimes in general by the orthodox position.¹¹⁸ Gary Hess also notes that the shift to a historical perspective – from

¹¹⁴ Regarding the misrepresentation of the war see Guenter Lewy's *America in Vietnam*, particularly chapter nine "Atrocities: Fiction and Fact."

¹¹⁵ Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context* (Washington D.C.: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 1981).

¹¹⁶ Ibid. Summers' work is among the most influential in this regard.

¹¹⁷ Lewy's book was heavily criticized, particularly by the Left, for being overly 'legalistic.' Norman Podhoretz cites some of the most prominent reviews in *Why We Were in Vietnam*, 190-191.

¹¹⁸ David Hunt, "War Crimes and the Vietnamese People: American Representations and Silences" *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 30-2 (1998): 73.

antiwar pundits to orthodox historians – was more than a simple continuation of the same arguments with a shift to the past-tense. The orthodox school adapted its arguments (which were largely remnants of the antiwar position) in response to the emerging revisionist scholarship. There was less interest in examining the supposed criminality of the war as it was fought in Vietnam, and more emphasis placed on the reasons for, and ‘necessity’ of, the war in the first place.¹¹⁹ The shift in attention away from Son My and other atrocities, and from moral questions more generally, has minimized their historical footprint and has inadvertently serviced those with designs to sanitize the war.

In terms of the ‘My Lai Massacre’ there is no commonly understood categorization of interpretations – that is, there are not specifically liberal orthodox or conservative revisionist interpretations of the massacre. Over the years there has been some semblance of a debate as to whether it represented typical behaviour of American combat soldiers in Vietnam, or if it was an aberration. There is a vague consensus that the generally hawkish idea of the massacre as aberration has survived into revisionist work, and the dovish notion of atrocities as commonplace remains with the orthodoxy; however, this is only partially accurate.¹²⁰ There are some predictable patterns in the way the massacre is approached by various scholars from each school of thought. If, for example, one is to examine the way revisionist historians approach the massacre some common themes and ideas emerge. These themes and ideas are, not surprisingly, compatible with their overall view of the war, and are mostly derivatives of conservative thought contemporary to the massacre. The connections are not as straightforward in orthodox histories, partly because the body of orthodox historiography is so much larger than revisionist work that

¹¹⁹ Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America’s Lost War*, 17.

¹²⁰ For example see: Marc Leepson, review of *War Without Fronts: The USA in Vietnam* by Bernd Greiner, translated from the German by Anne Wyburd with Victoria Fern, Yale University Press, 2009, *Vietnam* 22-6, (2010), 60.

there is obviously more variation. Based on the supposition that orthodox history is a continuation of the dovish tradition, and doves supposedly considered My Lai to be symptomatic of a wholly immoral enterprise, and representative of larger trends, one might expect fairly to find arguments supportive of such a claim in orthodox histories, and refutations of conservative arguments about the massacre. However, within the mainstream of the orthodox historical work – particularly that which forms the basis of college and university level survey texts there is a fairly unanimous assessment of the massacre. The basic assumptions upon which that assessment is made, many of which are implicit, are representative of a mostly conservative interpretation of the massacre. Examining how conservatives reacted to news of the massacre and the subsequent trial is useful in order to develop a model of this conservative interpretation.

Not surprisingly conservative arguments regarding the My Lai Massacre are rooted in fundamental tenets of post-WWII American conservatism. Fervent *anti-communism* provided the ideological reasoning for supporting the war and demonized the enemy. *Traditionalist* sentiments were a significant source of disconcertion regarding the radical youth culture that was associated with the antiwar movement and thought to be undermining morale and the war effort. Finally, a commitment to *individualism* made it logical to situate sole responsibility for the massacre among the criminals who ultimately did the killing.¹²¹ The only serious rationalizations for the supposedly guilty parties coming from conservatives were rooted in their own specific type of patriotism that demanded unflinching support of American foreign policy enacted against communism.¹²² This manifested itself in various ways, such as in a characterization of Vietnam as a dangerous foreign land that brought out the worst human

¹²¹George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* Thirtieth-Anniversary Edition (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2006), xx-xxi.

¹²² Seth Offenbach, "The Other Side of Vietnam: The Conservative Movement and the Vietnam War" (PhD diss., Stony Brook University, 2010, 39.

behaviour, and demonization of a communist enemy who debased American soldiers with immoral tactics.

Early Conservative Reactions

Some of the most prominent early writing by conservatives specifically address the massacre (and other accounts of atrocities), not because they think it reveals something about the Vietnam War, but quite the contrary, because they argue it has been misrepresented by the media as emblematic of American fighting. As a result they argue the war has been falsely characterized as little more than a series of atrocities committed against the Vietnamese and “the epitome of evil in the modern world.”¹²³ Therefore conservative renditions emphasize the personal and behavioural - the particular and the exceptional – in order to counter what they think is an inaccurate portrayal of the massacre as something other than an aberration. In their view, the massacre helps to *explain* nothing. The thinking here is similar to the way Norman Podhoretz, an influential neo-conservative thinker, characterized the Final Solution: “because Hitler and his cohorts were madmen on the Jewish question, there is probably little of general relevance we can learn from the Final Solution beyond what the Nuremberg trials established concerning the individual’s criminal accountability when acting upon superior orders, even within a system guided by insane aims.”¹²⁴ William F. Buckley speculated the same conclusion for My Lai when he wrote “If it was one company commander, and one platoon leader we may

¹²³ Guenter Lewy *America in Vietnam*, vi. Also see Norman Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam*. This was originally the view that prominent conservative thinkers expressed at the time the story was in the press. See William F. Buckley, “The Great Atrocity Hunt,” *National Review* 16 Dec. 1969, 1252.

¹²⁴ Norman Podhoretz, *Doings and Undoings* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), 351. Podhoretz is an American intellectual and commentator, and one of the most prominent early so-called ‘neo-conservatives.’ He was editor of *Commentary* magazine, for 35 years. *Commentary* is a neo-conservative journal and in its early years was a nexus for like-minded individuals to establish and refine their ideas.

conclude that the behavior was utterly eccentric, i.e. that no conclusions regarding the genus are to be inferred from the behavior of the particulars.”¹²⁵ Conservatives objected to an attempt to contextualize the massacre within a wider record of American firepower trained on South Vietnamese civilians and the ideological framework and decisions that underwrote such violence. As Kendrick Oliver put it, “to weave My Lai into a much broader pattern of indiscriminate killing by American forces was to dissolve the moral distinctions between the United States and the other side.”¹²⁶ Therefore Calley ‘and his men’ are very often front and centre in such treatments of the massacre. When there is deviation from this narrow focus, it tends to go very wide and often diffuse instead, to apportion blame to antiwar radicalism, the ‘liberal’ press, or to the nature of war in Vietnam.

In December 1969, shortly after the initial My Lai story broke in the press, William F. Buckley wrote an article in *The National Review*, the leading American conservative journal at the time, expressing exasperation over press coverage of the massacre and what he deemed to be the “liberal Left’s... uncontrollable impulse not to blame the particular criminal, but rather to vilify America generally.”¹²⁷ Buckley cited passages in *Time* magazine, the *New York Post*, and Mary McGrory’s syndicated column as particularly egregious examples of the lack of individual responsibility the “liberal Left,” was willing to apportion to the perpetrators of the massacre versus its willingness to propose a collective national responsibility. Norman Podhoretz later picked up on this trend too in *Why We Were in Vietnam* and was critical of the hypocrisy he

¹²⁵ William F. Buckley, “My Lai: Whose Fault,” *European Stars and Stripes*, December 13, 1969, 13.

¹²⁶ Kendrick Oliver, *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory*, 74.

¹²⁷ William F. Buckley, “The Great Atrocity Hunt,” *National Review* Dec 16, 1969, 1254. The *National Review* was founded in 1955 by William F. Buckley. Though not widely read by Americans as a whole, it has been very influential among conservatives. George Nash writes, “To a very substantial degree, the history of reflective conservatism in America after 1955 is the history of the individuals who collaborated in – or were discovered by – the magazine.” George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* Thirtieth-Anniversary Edition (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2006), 233.

thought it revealed in the so-called liberal left. He argued that since there was nothing “more repugnant to the moral and legal tradition of liberalism than the idea that an individual can be held responsible for an act he himself did not commit,” the whole argument was indicative of a disingenuous move to discredit the war. Thus he illuminated the link between two seemingly disparate conservative arguments – one about the massacre as the act of individual soldiers and the other about ‘liberal’ opposition to the war *using* the massacre to characterize the war broadly (and in his view, unfairly) as immoral.¹²⁸

There is something else evident in some early conservative reactions to the massacre: a reluctance to find responsibility with any *American*, let alone America or an American institution, policy, or objective. Buckley was willing to accept that guilt may lie with some individual soldiers, but totally rejected any wider dissemination of responsibility that would be indicative of systemic problems, or potentially undermine the moral credibility of the military. But he even qualified the potential guilt of the American GIs by adding that “a guerrilla war such as is being waged in Vietnam is full of ambiguities”, meaning that given the propensity of the enemy to break the rules of war, it might not be reasonable to expect American soldiers to follow those same rules.¹²⁹ Martin Gershen, a conservative journalist and professor whose 1971 book *Destroy or Die: The True Story of Mylai* [sic] presents a very sympathetic account of the perpetrators, but otherwise offers a conservative take on the war and the antiwar movement, spreads guilt, or rather responsibility, as thin as it goes – to war in general, and possibly human nature. He asks his readers, “given the opportunity and the right circumstances, wouldn’t all people kill?”¹³⁰ For Gershen the men of C Company were the only true victims. According to

¹²⁸ Norman Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam*, 189.

¹²⁹ William F. Buckley, “The Great Atrocity Hunt,” *National Review* 16 Dec. 1969, 1252.

¹³⁰ Martin Gershen, *Destroy or Die: the True Story of Mylai*, (New Rochelle: Arlington House, 1971), 49.

him an appropriate explanation for the massacres was that “an undetermined number of enemy suspects were killed inadvertently by an irrational company of men no longer psychologically capable of controlling their acts.”¹³¹ Others expressed similar doubt about the civilian status of the Vietnamese victims. Joseph Alsop, a journalist with strong anti-communist sentiments, insisted that due to North Vietnamese and Viet Cong indoctrination of civilians, “every single inhabitant of a ‘combat village’ like Song My [*sic*] is a combatant,” including little children and the old.¹³² The idea of an ambiguous “combat” situation in Son My has been a persistent component of hawkish rationalizations of the massacre, often in the guise of an “explanation,” despite the fact that there was no “combat” - the killing took place over several hours, during which time there were no American casualties in Thuan Yen, and no resistance of any sort.¹³³

Traditional religious values that recognize objective moral and ethical truths are of great importance to many American conservatives. For conservatives these values have been responsible for the cohesion of western civilization, whereas the secularization of western societies, and the severing of ethical moorings, were what led to the spread of radical ideology.¹³⁴ The My Lai massacre was used by Buckley in order to extend his arguments about the importance of these values.¹³⁵ In a December 1969 column Buckley pondered the question of where guilt lay in the case. From his perspective, as already noted, the “liberal Left” press was drawing a lot of hasty conclusions before the court had had a chance to make a decision in

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 301-2.

¹³² Joseph Alsop, “Hanoi Made All in Cong Villages Combatants” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 5 April, 1971, 20.

¹³³ B company suffered a few casualties from land mines or booby traps during their move through Son My. There was one self-inflicted casualty within C Company.

¹³⁴ George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* Thirtieth-Anniversary Edition (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2006), xx

¹³⁵ Seth Offenbach, “The Other Side of Vietnam: The Conservative Movement and the Vietnam War” (PhD diss., Stony Brook University, 2010). 150

the Calley case.¹³⁶ But more significantly, he disagreed with the conclusions of “many American moralizers” who found the cause of the massacre in the nature of the Vietnam War. Buckley was not troubled by a war he thought was fought for good reason (to suppress communism) nearly as much as he was troubled by an American society that was “deprived of the strength of religious sanctions, a society hugely devoted to hedonism, to permissive egalitarianism, to irresponsibility, to an indifference to authority and law.”¹³⁷ All the faults and weaknesses that in a warzone could lead to a massacre could also provide fertile ground for antiwar radicalism at home. Thus, he concluded “a better explanation for what happened according to this analysis is – not Vietnam but, to reach for a symbol, Berkeley.”¹³⁸ For a conservative like Buckley, who had been criticizing the dearth of these particular moral values in American society for years, it made more sense that young Americans who could commit such atrocious acts and had only been in Vietnam for a matter of months had an “ethical equilibrium [that] was unbalanced well before [they] came to Vietnam.”¹³⁹ Senator Thomas Dodd expressed a similar idea in a column for *Human Events*. Dodd wrote that Americans should not be surprised by the massacre because the GIs who committed the atrocities are a part of the same generation that was “leading the weird actions and revolts on campuses” and had “associated themselves with... a ‘pot culture’” that “has already torn asunder the fabric of domestic American society.”¹⁴⁰ David A. Keene, Chairman of the conservative youth group, Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) agreed with this speculation.¹⁴¹ Although blaming the massacre

¹³⁶ This is also significant because it is a demonstration of the way apportioning responsibility was limited to the determination of the courts, even though the military courts were powerless to deal with the men who were no longer in the military, and severely hampered in dealing with those who remained.

¹³⁷ William F. Buckley, “My Lai: Whose Fault,” *European Stars and Stripes*, December 13, 1969, 13.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Thomas Dodd, “Drugs at My Lai?” *Human Events*, 20 December, 1969. 15.

¹⁴¹ David A. Keene, “How are we Doing in Viet Nam?” *Human Events*, 1 August, 1970, 558.

on marijuana use was never taken seriously outside of a very small minority of people, the idea that permissive youth culture was somehow partly responsible – if not for the massacre directly, then for undermining morale – was more in line with the traditionalist roots of the conservative movement and more widely palatable. Thus, one might seek out the root cause of the massacres in supposedly permissive society in America rather than in the designs of the war; the same youth culture that was ‘disoriented’ enough to paint the whole war with the brush of My Lai.

Conservatives early on were attempting to use the massacre as a means to undermine the antiwar movement.¹⁴² Not only did prominent conservative voices try to associate the immorality of the massacre with what they saw as a similarly immoral radical antiwar movement, but Buckley also interpreted the public response to Calley’s verdict as a rejection of the movement. In fact, Buckley claimed to think the public was slightly confused about the issue. When there was wide public protest to the verdict and calls for President Nixon to intervene, Buckley wrote: “So without exactly realizing why, many Americans view the conviction as an elaboration of the attack on the military.”¹⁴³ He warned those Americans who might have opposed Calley’s conviction on this basis that their opposition might align them with the interests of radicals. Alsop contended that there was “a certain soundness of instinct” to protests of Calley’s conviction that was, he thought, a sign of popular revulsion to antiwar protesters.¹⁴⁴ In this regard the anti-communist leanings of Buckley and Alsop aligned their thinking on the issue. Despite some initial reluctance to assign responsibility to Americans for the massacre, once Calley’s conviction was issued, Buckley and many other conservatives found

¹⁴² Sandra Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement: Domestic Support for the Vietnam War and the Making of Modern American Conservatism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 222.

¹⁴³ William F. Buckley, “On the Right: Decision Criticized but Calley Isn’t Blameless” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 6 April, 1971. Also cited in Sandra Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement: Domestic Support for the Vietnam War and the Making of Modern American Conservatism*, 222.

¹⁴⁴ Joseph Alsop, “Hanoi Made All in Cong Villages Combatants” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 5 April, 1971, 20.

strategic advantage in supporting a conviction that severely limited culpability to at most a few men. However, for conservatives willing to acknowledge there were Americans guilty of atrocities in Vietnam, the real issue became establishing and emphasizing the atrocities of the enemy and America's comparatively righteous response to the crimes of its own soldiers.

The so-called "Hue Massacre" became the rallying point for conservatives when the subject of atrocities in Vietnam arose.¹⁴⁵ The Nixon administration assisted in "get[ting] out the facts on Hue" early in the news cycle of the massacre in order to establish the official approach to My Lai which was to draw a sharp distinction between what American soldiers did in Son My and the communist enemy "which has atrocity against civilians as one of its policies."¹⁴⁶ Nixon also made clear that he did not think it right that the "generosity and decency" of American soldiers in Vietnam should be "smeared and slurred" by the "incident" – a theme that would be particularly important many years later as the opposing sides in the culture war attempted to define the Vietnam War and the 1960s. The massacre was not to be a story about the war, but rather a story about aberrant individuals.

For conservatives Hue provides the *right* kind of context for an atrocity committed by Americans and this has been consistently a fundamental part of the conservative reaction to the Son My massacres. The comparison worked to emphasize the evils of communism, while at the same time the Calley trial worked to illustrate the exceptional character of the American atrocity and appeared to prove it was outside the bounds of acceptable behaviour for American soldiers.

¹⁴⁵ For recent assessment of the evidence and the way the Hue massacre has been remembered see Scott Laderman, "A Necessary Salve: The 'Hue Massacre' in History and Memory" in *Theatres of Violence: Massacre, Mass Killing and Atrocity Throughout History* ed. Philip G. Dwyer, Lyndall Ryan (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 213-225.

¹⁴⁶ H. R. Haldeman personal note taken during the meeting of a secret White House 'My Lai Task Force,' 1 December, 1969. As quoted in Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 321. Richard Nixon, The President's News Conference, Washington DC, 8 December, 1969. Online: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=2365> accessed January 28, 2014.

The distinction was important for the legitimacy of the “bloodbath” argument for the continuation of the war: if America withdrew from South Vietnam, the reasoning went, the communists would unleash a wave of violence on the South – just like in Hue.¹⁴⁷ If Americans thought their own soldiers were committing equally appalling atrocities it would obviously undermine the argument for continuing the war. While commenting on the progress of the war, Keene of the YAF insisted that atrocities in war are inevitable but argued “there is a significant difference between the occasional atrocity committed by an individual soldier and mass terror employed by a government.”¹⁴⁸ Calley’s trial indicated more than the limits of acceptable behaviour for American GIs; ironically it was used by conservatives to exemplify American, or western nobility in war. Military historian and founder of the Marine Corps Historical Foundation, Colonel R.D. Heinl Jr, wrote about the massacre in *Human Events*, a leading conservative periodical in the 1960s and 1970s. He painted an ugly picture of Quang Ngai. He described the province as “the hardest-core Viet Cong area,” in which “every village...is a fortified hamlet honeycombed with tunnels, bunkers and booby traps.” It was the scene “of repeated communist terrorism,” with a “sinister atmosphere of death and terror.”¹⁴⁹ It appears Heinl Jr. was proposing the Vietnamese people brought the massacre on themselves. He thought the real question raised by the massacre was “How can you fight a war of this abominable kind on terms that are morally acceptable to Western democracies?”¹⁵⁰ His answer was that it could not be done. The Colonel, as a result of his conclusion, was not questioning the morality of entering into the war. He was more concerned with Ronald Ridenhour’s motives for uncovering

¹⁴⁷ Seymour Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House* (New York: Summit Books, 1983), 131. Cited in Kendrick Oliver, *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory*, 74.

¹⁴⁸ David A. Keene, “How are We Doing in Viet Nam?” *Human Events*, 1 August, 1970, 558.

¹⁴⁹ Col. R.D. Heinl Jr. “Massacre was Viet Cong Stronghold” *Human Events* 13 December, 1969. 6.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

the massacre and was lamenting a perceived lack of fortitude among a squeamish public and a misguided and possibly dishonest press.¹⁵¹ Thus, America was forced to fight a dirty war against an immoral enemy and the massacre was the cost *America* had to pay as a virtuous nation.

Conservatives sought to reckon the massacre within a war they believed was just and necessary. Their arguments emphasised individuals, particularly Calley and his platoon, and stressed that the acts of a few crazy men did not negate the nobility of America's mission in Indochina. In the midst of Calley's trial the *Wall Street Journal* offered that moral judgements of the U.S. based upon the massacre needed to be kept in check because, unlike atrocities committed by foreign states "My Lai was committed by the frustrated agents of a policy ultimately traceable to idealistic concepts of foreign aid."¹⁵² Accordingly, not only was the massacre committed aberrantly by frustrated rogues, it was committed within a larger, well-intended mission. Such arguments also lent support to a popular tendency to deny responsibility rested with any Americans; the communists were a vicious enemy who made combat situations particularly ambiguous and encouraged such behaviour. Furthermore, atrocities were in the nature of warfare. If blame could be apportioned in America, the radical antiwar movement, with its secular permissiveness and drug culture, was a worthy recipient for wrecking young GIs' moral compass before they had even departed for Vietnam. Most conservatives expressed resentment over the nation's temporary fixation on the massacre because they felt it was not being contextualized properly; thus the concerted effort to re-centre the discussion of atrocities on the Hue Massacre. The supposed scale of Hue, and the reports of it being officially condoned served to emphasize the isolated nature of My Lai versus the typical nature of communist atrocity. For conservatives Hue proved the enemy was evil and the war was necessary. It was

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² David C. Anderson, "Is the U.S. Losing Moral Credibility?" *Wall Street Journal*, 1 June, 1970, 10.

also used to support conservative claims of a media bias – after all, they argued, why so much news about My Lai when the enemy’s massacres were much worse.¹⁵³ Calley’s trial and conviction supposedly proved America’s commitment to the values for which the war was being fought and emphasized American exceptionalism, the idea that no other nation in a time of war convicts its own soldiers. However, the most prevalent theme that ran through almost all conservative references to the My Lai Massacre was the claim that a biased media was using it to distort the reality of the war. It is not particularly surprising that conservatives responded to the massacre with conservative arguments. What is more surprising, as we will see in chapter three, is the dissemination of these conservative ideas about the massacre into wider arenas.

The Culture War Climate

In the decades since the end of the war the two main groups of opposing historical interpretations of the conflict have served as models or approaches to the war and often take on an ideological nature. The debate about Vietnam, although historically somewhat one-sided, has been particularly contentious due to its strong interconnectedness with much broader competing ideas about the nation. Marilyn B. Young has labeled the Vietnam War a “zone of contested meaning.” Sometimes there is a palpable subtext to discussions about the Vietnam War and the debate over the nature and execution of the war becomes a vehicle for the expression of ideas about present American politics and culture.¹⁵⁴ Occasionally the present implications are more explicit such as in the ubiquitous ‘lessons of Vietnam’ the nation is supposed to have learned or failed to learn, as advocated by historians, journalists, militarists, and politicians in the decades after 1975. In other instances expressions may very well be historical in nature yet interpreted or

¹⁵³ Edith Efron, “There is a Network News Bias” *Human Events* 14 March, 1970, 200.

¹⁵⁴ Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990*, 314.

misinterpreted by critics as veiled contemporary political or cultural commentary. Debates about the war, particularly between the two primary competing schools of thought, in both public and academic forums often regress to involve speculations or accusations about the motives of respective authors. Michael Doidge observes, the current oppositional nature of the historiography “coats subsequent analysis and debate in a bipolar framework mimicking the Cold War ideals with which the war was originally fought.”¹⁵⁵ For example, David Anderson characterizes revisionist scholars as the “idealistic minority” and claims their brand of history is suited to the needs of present day neoconservative foreign policy that, in Anderson’s view, could lead to another “Vietnam.”¹⁵⁶ Conversely, in the introduction to *Triumph Forsaken*, Moyar claims that imbalance in the debate favouring the orthodox interpretation is perpetuated in academia by an institutionalized orthodox bias in history departments across the country.¹⁵⁷ The supposition of a ‘liberal bias’ in American universities was central to the culture war arguments of conservatives (and neoconservatives) throughout the 80s and 90s. The vindictiveness is not reserved solely for Americans; in a review of Bernd Greiner’s *War Without Fronts: The USA in Vietnam*, Andrew J. Bacevich argues that Greiner’s indictment of American policies in Indochina is motivated by a revisionist project aimed at minimizing the spotlight on Germany for twentieth century crimes against humanity.¹⁵⁸ In other words, interpreting the Vietnam War is difficult to disentangle from the social-cultural-political conflict between liberals and conservatives over the core values of the nation. And as David Anderson took away from his participation in a 1994 Tulane University conference on the My Lai massacre, understandings of the massacre are

¹⁵⁵ Andrew Wiest and Michael J. Doidge, eds., *Triumph Revisited: Historians Battle for the Vietnam War*, 223.

¹⁵⁶ David L. Anderson, “One Vietnam War Should Be Enough and Other Reflections on Diplomatic History and the Making of Foreign Policy,” SHAFR Presidential Address, *Diplomatic History* 30-1 (2006), 1-21.

¹⁵⁷ Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War 1954-1965*, xii.

¹⁵⁸ Andrew J. Bacevich, commentary in “U.S. Conduct in the Vietnam War,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 13-3 (2011), 185-188.

equally tied to and constrained by memories of the war.¹⁵⁹ Awareness of the contentiousness and various meanings of American history and memory of the Vietnam War is fundamental to understanding the way the massacre is remembered.

William George Eckhardt, the Chief Prosecutor for the My Lai cases, claims that a wave of cultural conflict in America during and after the war may have crested with the reception of the massacre at home. The country's reception of the massacre as one best characterized by conflict between Americans during the trial is open for some debate.¹⁶⁰ Although the general climate of the period was one of conflict, Calley's trial and conviction was one of the rare issues that brought many so-called hawks and doves together, albeit for totally different reasons. However, the connection Eckhardt draws between the "cultural civil war," as he put it, during the last quarter of the century and interpretation of the massacre is useful.¹⁶¹ This is not because the culture war has created two oppositional understandings of the massacre, each vying for legitimacy, and each representing larger polarized ideas about American culture. On the contrary, I argue the culture war has resulted in a lack of competing and significantly different understandings of the massacre. That is, the contentious nature of memory of the Vietnam War, especially concerning issues of American responsibility, and particularly matters involving American soldiers, has limited the range of acceptable discourse in most popular forums. Christian Appy has referred to the reluctance in America to revisit and address questions about the execution of the war and the impact upon Vietnam and its people, as a "muffling of public

¹⁵⁹ David L. Anderson ed., *Facing My Lai: Moving Beyond the Massacre*, 12.

¹⁶⁰ For example, in Herbert C. Kelman and Lee H. Lawrence's sociological study of attitude towards Calley's trial and conviction they note that "Rarely do 70% of a national sample agree on any current issue." They were referring to the disapproval rating for Calley's conviction. Herbert C. Kelman and Lee H. Lawrence, "Assignment of Responsibility in the Case of Lt. Calley: Preliminary Report on a National Survey," 178.

¹⁶¹ William George Eckhardt, "My Lai: An American Tragedy" *UMKC Law Review* 68, 1999-2000, 673. On the issue of broad support for Calley see Herbert C. Kelman and Lee H. Lawrence, "Assignment of Responsibility in the Case of Lt. Calley: Preliminary Report on a National Survey," *Journal of Social Issues* 28 no.1 (1972): 177-212.

memory.” He points to the popular trope of ‘healing from the war’ as a primary culprit due to its proclivity for easily digestible memories that avoid conflict.¹⁶² Conflict is antithetical to healing from this viewpoint. Invoking difficult interpretations of the past can often invite accusations of anti-patriotism and attacking veterans. Moyar’s broad comment about orthodox history slandering veterans is a case in point. The particularly pointed and personal criticisms leveled at Bernd Greiner’s *War Without Fronts* by some American historians prompted Greiner to respond: “Call war crimes by their proper name, and you are charged with insulting all men in uniform and thereby being unpatriotic – at best.”¹⁶³ This is precisely the sort of accusation that many other writers have faced when attempting to render a responsible accounting of American atrocities in Vietnam. In most cases this sort of attack is unfair because it relies on a misinterpretation or a misrepresentation of an author’s work. It is an odd reversal because more often than not, work like Greiner’s, or Nick Turse’s, or Deborah Nelson’s are actually highly sympathetic to fighting soldiers, and much less so of higher powers that dictated the nature of the war. Charges that their work is somehow anti-patriotic ignores the fact that much of this work is written with a sense of patriotism that is just as strong (and possibly better directed) as that which drives its critics.¹⁶⁴ The sensitivity of the issue is apparent in the ubiquity of the seemingly obligatory professions of reverence for those who have served in the armed forces in almost all accounts of American atrocities in Vietnam – as though without making such professions explicit an historical analysis or account of such a nature could be deemed fairly to

¹⁶² Christian Appy, “The Muffling of Public Memory in Post-Vietnam America,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 45-23 (1999).

¹⁶³ Bernd Greiner, Reply to the commentaries in “U.S. Conduct in the Vietnam War,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 13-3 (2011), 202.

¹⁶⁴ On this subject Greiner writes, “Out of respect for the men and women who served in Vietnam, I want to emphasize that my book *War without Fronts: The USA in Vietnam* neither explicitly nor between the lines portrays all U.S. soldiers as ‘cowardly marauders.’ Nor do I present a ‘picture of a generalized inclination to commit atrocities,’ not even by implication.” *Ibid.*, 199.

be an antipatriotic attack on all veterans. Regarding the aftermath of the massacre in the U.S, Kendrick Oliver suggests the feeling among some Americans that the condemnation faced by the nation and American soldiers was too harsh might be misguided because it overlooks that fact that the criticism was indicative of a higher expectation of the country that is in itself a kind of praise. What might it mean if there was no shock, not condemnation for such an atrocity?¹⁶⁵ This is the spirit with which much of the American criticism of the conduct of the war is written. Nelson's *The War Behind Me* paints a horrific and detailed picture of many of the most brutal atrocities documented in the declassified War Crimes Working Group records through the use of hundreds of interviews and correspondents with surviving veterans. By thanking the many Vietnam veterans "who served their country a second time by coming to the phone and opening the door" she too makes the point that patriotism need not be blind.¹⁶⁶

The question of patriotism and the *right* way to remember the Vietnam War was raised many years earlier than Greiner's observation, and in much more public forum than the pages of an academic journal. Ronald Reagan's rise to presidency was fueled by populist rhetoric undergirded by a conservative tone that emphasized pride in self, in the nation, and in the armed forces. His 1980 speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) was significant in this regard for the way he effectively coalesced support for war veterans with a conservative reading of the war as a noble cause. Sandra Scanlon, a historian specializing in conservative activism in the Cold War era, argues that a fundamental characteristic of the populist conservative framing of the war is the way in which patriotic support for American veterans and prisoners of war (POWs) is linked with a positive revision of the war.¹⁶⁷ Thus the successfulness of Reagan's speech

¹⁶⁵ Kendrick Oliver, *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory*, 283.

¹⁶⁶ Deborah Nelson, *The War Behind Me: Vietnam veterans Confront the Truth About U.S. War Crimes*, 190.

¹⁶⁷ Sandra Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement: Domestic Support for the Vietnam War and the Making of Modern American Conservatism*, 2.

should be gauged not by the relative traction of his ‘noble cause’ argument, for which the speech is most often cited, but by the degree to which the conflation of patriotism and respect for veterans with a sanitized, if not overtly conservative, memory of the war helped to silence those memories that contested the nobility of the war.¹⁶⁸ Four years later at Arlington National Cemetery Reagan reiterated the connection between a memory of the war as a “noble cause” and “the veterans of Vietnam who were never welcomed home with speeches and bands,” and who received “so little thanks.” He at once gave patriotic dignity to positive memories of the war, while soiling an oppositional memory that treated “heroes” so poorly. Lest anyone think it time for such matters to be relegated to the past, he reminded the nation that for the remaining prisoners of war and their families “Vietnam is not over for them.”¹⁶⁹ The message in the simplest form is: for the sake of the nation’s veterans, who have been mistreated by a misunderstanding of the war, the country needs to accept that the war was fought with noble intentions. That these intentions paved the way for atrocities such as the massacres in Son My is precisely the sort of history or memory that might be accused of “dishonor[ing] the memory of 50,000 young Americans who died.”¹⁷⁰ Jack Smith, a psychologist and veteran, observed the conflict this conflation created for veteran he encountered. “Veterans who try to turn Vietnam into a winnable, noble cause do not – along with many others in the country – have the

¹⁶⁸ Patrick Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veteran, Memorials, and the Politics of Healing*, 15-16.

¹⁶⁹ Ronald Reagan, “Remarks Honoring the Vietnam War’s Unknown Soldier,” Arlington National Cemetery, Arlington, 28 May, 1984. Online. <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/5862> Accessed 2 September, 2013.

¹⁷⁰ Ronald Reagan, “Peace: Restoring the Margin of Safety” Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention, Chicago, 18 August 1980. Online. <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/reference/8.18.80.html> Accessed 2 September, 2013. Again a year later Reagan’s Secretary of State George Shultz reiterated the noble cause rhetoric in a Veteran’s Day speech on the Washington Mall during which he expressed what he thought was the true meaning of Vietnam. That meaning was twofold: Veterans and families can be proud because “our sacrifice was in the service of noble ideals,” and events in Indochina since the end of the war have proven that to be true, and America could not afford to doubt itself else “world stability and freedom [would lose] ground.” George Schultz, “The Meaning of Vietnam,” 25 April, 1985.

framework to understand the coexistence of nobility of service and the misguidedness of the war. The country is still groping towards that conclusion.”¹⁷¹

The seductiveness of a supposedly apolitical patriotic approach to remembering the Vietnam War positively was not lost on presidents following Reagan. At his inauguration President George H.W. Bush declared that the war “began in earnest a quarter of a century ago, and surely the statute of limitation has been reached.... The final lesson of Vietnam is that no great nation can long afford to be sundered by a memory.” He was reemphasising the need to move beyond the national conflict and remember that the architects of the war were sincere in intentions, thus heeding the link between the image of a noble war and cultural climate for healing.¹⁷² Six years later President Bill Clinton echoed the same sentiments in his speech recognizing the normalization of relations with Vietnam. “Whatever we may think about the political decisions of the Vietnam era,” he said, “the brave Americans who fought and died there had noble motives... Whatever divided us before let us consign to the past.”¹⁷³

The conservative conflation of patriotic support for veterans with a positive memory of the war has been used as a political weapon as well. Indeed, John Kerry discovered this during his 2004 presidential bid when he became the target of a smear campaign orchestrated by a group of politically motivated veterans operating under the name Swift Boat Veterans for Truth.¹⁷⁴ Kerry’s antiwar activity upon his return from serving in Vietnam, particularly his 1971 testimony to Congress, was deemed by the group and its supporters to have “distorted the conduct of

¹⁷¹ Jack Smith quoted in Myra MacPherson, “What did it Cost, Our Vietnam War? Here is the Price...” *Washington Post*, 25 May, 1984. C1.

¹⁷² George H. W. Bush, Inaugural Address, 20 January, 1989. Online: <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/3419>, Accessed 11 September, 2013.

¹⁷³ Bill Clinton, “Remarks Announcing the Normalization of Diplomatic Relations With Vietnam,” 11 July, 1995. Online: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=51605> Accessed 12 September, 2013.

¹⁷⁴ For an analysis of the SBVT campaign against Kerry see G. Mitchell Reyes, “The Swift Boat Veterans For Truth, the Politics of Realism, and the Manipulation of Vietnam Remembrance in the 2004 Presidential Election” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 9-4 (2006): 571-600.

American soldiers.” They were largely parroting the accusations levelled against him in 1971 by a conservative veterans group, Vietnam Veterans for a Just Peace. Although the accuracy of many claims made by the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth are suspect, they did offer one astute observation regarding the evolution of Kerry’s own projection of his Vietnam service: Kerry’s transformation from an antiwar protester to a “war hero.”¹⁷⁵ This transformation reflects the influence of the conservative program of linking patriotism and reverence for veterans with an uncritical memory of the war.

Given the nature of the massacre and the climate of public discourse regarding the war it is of little surprise that a somewhat detoxified and muted memory of the massacre persists. Bobby Muller, president of Vietnam Veterans of America, was surprised when speaking to colleges across the country in 1983 when he was asked by students “What’s My Lai, and who is Lt. Calley?*[sic]*”¹⁷⁶ There is little doubt that even by the early 1980s, My Lai did not carry the same relevance or meaning that it did in the early 1970s, but My Lai has never been forgotten as is sometimes suggested. Nor is the mere survival of the referent “My Lai massacre” the only mnemonic problem. Some of the most common memories and historical accounts of the My Lai massacre serve almost equal utility to any project bent on sanitizing the American war in Vietnam. Frustration over the way a common memory of the massacre was developing is evident in an observation made by Ronald Ridenhour in 1998: “Within a few years, if you stopped most Americans on the street who were politically conscious and who had observed all of this and paid attention to it and then asked them what My Lai was, they would say: ‘Well wasn’t that where that lieutenant... Calley went crazy and killed all those people?’ My response

¹⁷⁵ Swift Boat Veterans Letter to John Kerry, 4 May, 2004. Online: <http://www.swiftvets.com/article.php?story=20040629220813790> Accessed 22 October, 2013.

¹⁷⁶ Bobby Muller quoted in “Now We Are All Veterans of Vietnam” *Washington Post*, 27 May, 1984. There a hint of irony in the fact that Calley’s name was misspelled in the article.

to that is, not exactly, not at all.”¹⁷⁷ However, a national memory would not accommodate an acknowledgment that Calley was a bit player, and the massacre was a Task Force-wide atrocity including the upper command. Nor would it allow for the fact that there were multiple massacres on the same day committed by different companies, and they were covered up by the highest levels of command within the division. Such facts demonstrate a degree of institutionalized moral decay well beyond the realm of blundering incompetence and ‘mistakes,’ and are much harder, if not impossible to convert into a national memory, particularly if they were never properly addressed. Instead My Lai has become a story about a few rogue soldiers who, driven mad by a foreign land and an enemy unwilling to fight in the open according to the rules of war, lost control in the fog of war and killed innocents. It is a story about a war that was improperly fought, and a war in which young men were forced into situations incomprehensible to anyone who was not there alongside them. For some others still, it merely revealed the nature of warfare.

The conservative tendency to link patriotism with unflinching support of the military has blurred the line between responsible inquiry and criticism and slander to such a degree that asking hard questions about American atrocities in Vietnam has become somewhat dangerous to one’s reputation. In his excellent study of American memory of the Vietnam War, Patrick Hagopian calls atrocity stories “the unspoken antagonist of every conservative veteran’s insistence that the war must be remembered as noble.”¹⁷⁸ The slandering of Kerry is a perfect example, as are the attacks on Greiner’s work. How this affects the conclusions journalists and historians come to when writing about the subject is hard to know. This very issue may have been a topic of conversation in the editorial room of the *Toledo Blade* in 2003. The *Blade*

¹⁷⁷ David L. Anderson, *Facing My Lai: Moving Beyond the Massacre*, 41, 56.

¹⁷⁸ Patrick Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veteran, Memorials, and the Politics of Healing*, 19.

printed a series of articles uncovering atrocities committed by an American unit in Vietnam known as Tiger Force. One of the lead headlines for the series was “Rogue GIs unleashed Wave of Terror in Central Highlands.”¹⁷⁹ It was an important piece of journalism because it was one of the first accounts published from the Vietnam War Crimes Working Group records. When the *New York Times* interviewed three of the men cited in the *Blade* articles they each stressed their opposition to being characterized as a “rogue” unit; they felt the real story was that while they were killing and destroying wantonly, “their superiors knew what they were doing.”¹⁸⁰ Nick Turse was cited in the same *Times* article stating that from his research into the same archives the *Blade* reporters used, the Tiger Force documents “didn’t really stand out... It was just one of hundreds.”¹⁸¹ The articles in the *Times* and the *Blade* shared a good deal of similar evidence and sources. In particular the *Blade* offered the same evidence that indicated superiors in Vietnam and the U.S. knew about and were complicit in the atrocities, yet they still chose to characterize the soldiers as rogues. When questioned about this interpretation by the *New York Times* and Turse, the *Toledo Blade* rebutted by insisting the *Times* was doing a “disservice to the many hundreds of thousands of U.S. soldiers who served admirably in Vietnam.”¹⁸²

Adding to the delicacy of the issues the *Blade* story raised was the fact that America was at war in Iraq. This compounded the contentious nature of the story which was likely to rile the feathers of those who thought a critique of the military to be inappropriate during wartime. This context makes the *Blade*’s rather cautious conclusions all the more understandable, though still unfortunate. It also offers some explanation for why such a seemingly explosive story gained

¹⁷⁹ Michael D. Sallah and Mitch Weiss, “Rogue GIs Unleashed Wave of Terror in Central Highlands” *Toledo Blade*, 20 October, 2003.

¹⁸⁰ John Kifner, “Report on Brutal Vietnam Campaign Stirs Memories” *New York Times* 28 December, 2003, N24.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² Jack Lessenberry, “Story of Tiger Force Had to Be Told: New York Times Follow-up did a Diservice to the Many Soldiers who Served Admirably” *Toledo Blade* 4 January, 2004, B5.

almost no national media attention. The series was recognized within journalistic circles, and received several awards, but did not spark serious public debate, nor secondary coverage in the national media.

In the late 1970s Paul Weyrich, a conservative activist and founder of several conservative action groups including the Heritage Foundation and the Moral Majority, said of the culture war, “It’s a war of ideology, it’s a war of ideas, it’s a war about our way of life. And it has to be fought with the same intensity, I think, and dedication as you would fight a shooting war.”¹⁸³ This climate of ideological struggle meant that atrocities such as the Son My massacres that should have transcended ideology, not to mention arguments about the war, did not. The My Lai Massacre became inseparable from the contest over the meaning of the Vietnam War which was, along with the associated domestic responses to the war, a particularly contested front in the war of ideas, and as such assessments of the massacre were shaped by this war of ideas. One of the unfortunate consequences of this highly charged ideological climate has been the marginalization of assessments of the massacres in Son My be that are not rooted in a desire to critique or praise the war. There are better reasons for historical inquiry here, such as a reminder that the nation has not properly addressed the issue, particularly the victims – let alone attempted to reconcile it. It seems a bit ethnocentric to assume addressing the massacres in Son My is merely a means of critiquing America’s past.

Also during the late 1970s ‘antiwar’ or orthodox scholarship was leaving behind its moral arguments about the criminality of the war in favour of arguments presumed to be more historically objective. Instead focus shifted to critiquing the high-level reasons for going to war, and their invalidity, which was intended to render the entire endeavor as mistaken and even

¹⁸³ Richard Viguerie, *The New Right: We’re Ready to Lead* (Falls Church: Viguerie Press, 1981), 55 as cited in Daniel T. Rogers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 1.

unjust. In the next chapter I will address and explain what I refer to as ‘exceptionalist’ interpretations of the My Lai Massacre. The result of this shift in attention is partly apparent in the way these exceptionalist interpretations have been incorporated into orthodox scholarship.

CHAPTER 3

EXCEPTIONALIZING THE ‘MY LAI MASSACRE’

Conservative responses contemporary to the Son My massacres have persisted over the decades and remain present to some degree in all but a limited range of studies that focus on war crimes, atrocities, or the massacres in Son My specifically – this includes a good deal of the orthodox ‘antiwar’ historiography as well as more popular sources. Together, or in various admixtures, these ideas have permeated American history and memory of the Vietnam War and perpetuate a mythology of the My Lai Massacre that accentuates a limited and exceptional model of the atrocity. Other factors that are not directly related to a conscious (or unconscious) desire to contain, minimize, or forget the massacres tend to further this *exceptionalist* model.¹⁸⁴ Additionally, in many accounts of the war that do touch on the My Lai Massacre, there is a lack of critical attention to details that is revealing of the importance the Massacre is accorded by many canonical historians of the war. Despite the existence of strong evidence that refutes them, the most common myths about the massacres persist. According to some historians, history is supposed to be distinguishable from memory by historians’ transcendence from present interests and their commitment to methodological rigor.¹⁸⁵ This distinction in regards to the way the My Lai Massacre has been documented in all but specialized monographs is somewhat nebulous.

Exceptionalist arguments regarding the My Lai Massacre tend to rest on a limited or partial account of the basic facts of Task Force Barker’s attack on Son My. They tend to minimize, obscure, or overlook important details that shatter the established myth that there was

¹⁸⁴ Nicholas Turse has also advanced the idea that an “exceptionalist argument” regarding My Lai permeates Vietnam historiography although he does not offer an explicit analysis of this term, nor does he draw a connection to American conservatism. I have borrowed the neologism and offer my own characterization of the term here. Nicholas Turse, “‘Kill Anything That Moves’: U.S. War Crimes and Atrocities in Vietnam, 1965-1973” 150-198.

¹⁸⁵ John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History* (Harlow: Pearson, 2010), 303-304

one massacre in one village committed by out-of-control GIs. The referent My Lai Massacre is perfectly suited for maintaining the mythology because, as I have already indicated, the name “My Lai” is incorrect, the place to which it refers is uncertain, and it has been used inconsistently in all sorts of publications since the operation was discovered. Often the My Lai Massacre is described as the crazed act of a few rogue soldiers. Some such accounts claim the massacre was enabled by the decay of leadership and a lack of discipline in C Company. Lt. Calley’s role in the massacre is often over-emphasized, either intentionally, or simply by virtue of the fact that his name is regularly the only one that is included in many accounts of the massacre. This is compounded by the fact that his trial was a significant domestic event during the war. However, the actual massacres in Son My, the trial, and the domestic turmoil it supposedly revealed are often blurred together into a single narrative of the My Lai Massacre. His role in the most infamous aspect of the massacre has further exaggerated both his significance and the exceptionality of the atrocities perpetrated in Thuan Yen. Frequently the full scope of atrocities committed that day in Son My is narrowed to the actions of one platoon in one small area. The personal stories of individual soldiers and their roles in the massacre in Thuan Yen are commonly the focus of documentaries which tends to accentuate criminal culpability at the platoon and company level even within the discourse of ‘following orders.’ Further compounding this emphasis on the soldiers, are the most common explanations that situate the cause of the massacres in inadequate leadership and training in the laws of war. Finally, the existence of photographs of the aftermath of the massacre in Thuan Yen and their mass reproduction in newspapers, magazines, books, television news programming and documentaries since the end of 1969 has secured, but also somewhat limited, the subject of the photos in the history and memory of the war. This chapter will explain and expand on each of these factors

that characterize and perpetuate an exceptionalist memory of the massacre. The ubiquity of these interpretations of the massacre throughout American history and popular memory of the war demonstrates a reluctance within America to face the massacres honestly. Additionally, since a good deal of these interpretations can be found in liberal orthodox histories, a conservative current is revealed within the so-called orthodox historiography as well as popular memory of the war.

What and Where

There is no consensus on the scope of events which the referent ‘My Lai Massacre’ signifies. Certainly the name suggests it was a single massacre in a single place; however, as the Peers Report makes clear, there were multiple massacres committed by different platoons and companies in different sub-hamlets. This is not the way it is portrayed in many popular histories. I have already noted the vast discrepancies in cited casualty figures and argued that this is indicative of the dearth of scholarly attention the massacres are accorded. On the other hand, if one is to give the benefit of the doubt and assume the numbers cited have been carefully vetted by their respective authors, it throws into question the scope the authors attribute to the massacre. George Herring situates the massacre in the “village of My Lai”, cites Calley’s name only, and a number of casualties that is only representative of the murders in which his platoon was involved.¹⁸⁶ Gerald J. DeGroot only cites the approximate casualty figure the CID estimated for Thuan Yen, yet CID report states this number excludes My Hoi and Binh Tay.¹⁸⁷ Marilyn

¹⁸⁶ George Herring, *America’s Longest War: the United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 212. Herring has since written a much more thorough and accurate account of the massacres. See “The Vietnam War and the My Lai Massacre,” *History Now* 31 (Spring 2012). Online: <http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/sixties/essays/vietnam-war-and-my-lai-massacre>. Accessed 10 June, 2014. One the issue of casualty numbers, see page 36 of this thesis.

¹⁸⁷ Gerald J. DeGroot, *A Noble Cause? America and the Vietnam War*, 295. RDAR Volume 1, 6-18-6-19.

Young states the massacre was committed by a single platoon in the “village of My Lai.”¹⁸⁸ The narrator of the documentary “Four Hours in My Lai,” explains that the massacre was committed by the “young GIs of Charlie Company” in the “village of My Lai.”¹⁸⁹ This sort of simplification of basic details is prevalent throughout the historiography of the war and in popular accounts of the massacre. Simon Hall, in a review of Kendrick Oliver’s book on the subject, provides a concise and accurate (and rare) summation of the atrocities committed throughout Son My, including the massacres in My Hoi and Binh Tay, and adds that all the details are now “known collectively as ‘My Lai.’”¹⁹⁰ His assertion is that the misnomer refers to the sum of activities committed by Task Force Barker in Son My village, and for some unstated reason (possibly for simplicity’s sake, or due to the weight of precedent) the misnomer persists and this is all commonly understood by those who refer to the ‘My Lai massacre.’¹⁹¹ Some historians share this view and use the name in this inclusive manner, however, it is far from a consensus understanding.¹⁹² If this were the case, one would rightly expect to see far more correctives regarding the ambiguity, particularly in many of the sources cited above because of their primary use as teaching material. In fact, the name “My Lai massacre,” while effectively isolating a specific set of events in Thuan Yen, also subsumes the Calley court-martial case and the American domestic drama that it entailed. The “Son My massacres” is a more accurate and

¹⁸⁸ Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990*, 243.

¹⁸⁹ *Four Hours in My Lai*, directed by Kevin Sim (Yorkshire Television, 1989)

¹⁹⁰ Simon Hall, “Scholarly Battles over the Vietnam War” *The Historical Journal* 52-3 (2009): 824.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² “My Lai” is sometimes used consciously to refer to the sum of events in Son My, primarily for the sake of recognition. For example, see: Joseph Goldstein, Burke Marshall, and Jack Schwartz, *The My Lai Massacre and its Cover-up: Beyond the Reach of Law?*; Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*; David L. Anderson, *Facing My Lai: Moving Beyond the Massacre*; Kendrick Oliver, *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory*; William Thomas Allison, *My Lai: An American Atrocity in the Vietnam War* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2012). All of these authors are well aware of the full scope of events yet have chosen to use the name “My Lai” in the titles of their work due to its establishment in American memory. Oliver touches on this point in his preface while addressing the misnomer. Kendrick Oliver, *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory*, viii.

honest name if a single referent is needed for the sum of atrocities on March 16 in Son My. Joe Allen's brief coverage of the massacre in *Vietnam: The (Last) War the U.S. Lost*, is telling. Allen makes it clear he considers atrocities during the war to be a systemic problem related to specific American tactics, adding that the My Lai Massacre was the "most famous case...but by no means the only one." He adds, "My Lai was not an aberration – smaller, unreported My Lais happened throughout the war."¹⁹³ However, for the 'My Lai massacre' he cites 350 civilian casualties – again about the same number the CID estimated for Thuan Yen only.¹⁹⁴ Oddly he makes no reference to the massacre in My Hoi that would have greatly substantiated the general point he is making about the frequency of such crimes. It is clear that Allen has no interest in minimizing the extent of the massacre, which leaves one curious as to why there is not a better accounting of it, and casts doubt on the generous assumption made by Hall.

The inconsistent usage of the unit names of municipal political sub-divisions (village>hamlet>sub-hamlet) also suggests that Hall's assumption regarding a consensus understanding of the extent of the 'My Lai massacre' is mistaken.¹⁹⁵ Indeed, this issue might explain a good deal of the confusion: the massacres committed by the Americal Division on March 16 did all occur in a single *village* –Son My. More often than not, Thuan Yen ('My Lai 4') is referred to as a village in American historiography. Both B and C Companies were conducting massacres within the village, yet so often the massacre is framed as a single act by a single Company in a single village. This is suggestive of a combination of errors in both, semantics and scope of actions, rather than a self-conscious decision to use the misnomer for the

¹⁹³ Joe Allen, *Vietnam: The (Last) War the U.S. Lost* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008), 48.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ It is worth noting that Hall made this assumption in a review of Kendrick Oliver's excellent monograph on the history and memory of the My Lai massacre, which is very clear about this point and may have influenced Hall's assumption.

sake of name recognition. But there are other reasons to doubt the misnomer is being used in this way consciously. During the initial reporting of the massacre in the American press, the village name of Son My was often used (often spelled Songmy), but the focus of attention was quickly narrowed to the atrocities committed in Thuan Yen (My Lai 4).¹⁹⁶ The name ‘My Lai massacre’ came into common usage before details of the massacre committed by B Company in My Hoi became publicly known. In the vast majority of historical accounts since then, when describing the ‘My Lai massacre’ only the most well-known details of C Company’s massacre in Thuan Yen are cited. Therefore it is fair to assume that for most authors the name ‘My Lai massacre’ refers exclusively to the atrocities of C Company in Thuan Yen. Nomenclatural errors of this type may appear somewhat trivial; however, they do tend to add to the fog that envelops popular accounts of the massacre.

As has already been noted, another massacre occurred close by on the same day in My Hoi (misidentified on American military maps as My Khe). Sometimes, although rarely, this is referred to as the ‘My Khe massacre’ which clearly differentiates it from the ‘My Lai Massacre.’” Regardless of whether a writer is knowingly lumping the two massacres together, or is wittingly or unwittingly leaving the massacre in My Hoi out of the historical narrative, ‘My Lai massacre’ [*singular*] is misleading. One possible explanation for overlooking My Hoi is that the details are much less clear than those of Thuan Yen. Another reason might be that there were fewer casualties than in Thuan Yen. Neither of these explanations are satisfactory. The details are only less clear in terms of specifics; there is no doubt that the massacre did occur and was committed by some of the men of B Company, and it was similar in nature to what happened in

¹⁹⁶ Thuan Yen was the name most commonly used by its inhabitants. It was also known as Xom Lang. Early press accounts of the massacre in “Songmy”: Henry Kamm, “Vietnamese Say G.I.’s Slew 567 in Town” *New York Times*, 17 November, 1969, 1. “Assessing Songmy” *Wall Street Journal*, 1 December, 1969, 1. Seymour Hersh, “Hamlet Attack Called ‘Point-Blank Murder’” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 20 November, 1969.

Thuan Yen.¹⁹⁷ Most evidence points to upwards of ninety civilians killed at the hands of B Company.¹⁹⁸ That specific acts cannot be attributed to specific names does not adequately explain or justify the virtual erasure of the massacre in My Hoi from American history and memory. Of course, it did not help that during the initial press conference held to reveal the findings of the Peers inquiry, General Peers himself effectively buried journalists' questions about a second massacre by, somewhat ironically, suggesting that any theories about a second massacre were based on nomenclatural confusion.¹⁹⁹ Bilton and Sim recognized the significance of the massacre in My Hoi: "It utterly destroyed the argument that My Lai had been something completely out of the ordinary, an aberration committed by a rogue outfit."²⁰⁰ Although one can only speculate as to the reasoning for grouping these massacres under one name, the result lends support to the myth that there was only one massacre, which in turn supports a litany of exceptionalist arguments that focus on the particular details of C Company men, Calley and his notorious incompetence, Medina's orders, and other behavioural and micro-level specifics. Such details appear to carry more explanatory weight if one assumes the massacre in Thuan Yen was an isolated case.

Defining the 'My Lai massacre' too broadly by including all the atrocities in Son My village (as Hall suggests is the norm) gives weight to exceptionalist arguments, yet so too does defining the massacre too narrowly and specifically. Lewy remarks that "villagers were regularly killed in combat assaults on defended hamlets, but the cold-blooded rounding up and

¹⁹⁷ The similarities between the massacres committed by C and B Companies is open to debate according to at least one analysis. Mark J. Taylor argues B Company's massacre was different in the sense that it was somewhat less co-ordinated and planned than the massacres in Tu Cung committed by C Company. Mark J. Taylor, "The Massacre at My Khe 4: A Different Story" 237-238. Nevertheless, the two companies were part of the same Task Force, under the same umbrella of command that effectively condoned killing civilians.

¹⁹⁸ RDAR Volume 1, 2-4, 7-1.

¹⁹⁹ Kendrick Oliver, *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory*, 83.

²⁰⁰ Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 309.

shooting of civilians was an unusual event.”²⁰¹ Harry Summers summed up the “My Lai incident” in a similar fashion: “Calley... moved his 25 men into the hamlet and began rounding up Vietnamese civilians – old men, women, children, and babies – and herded them into a ditch. These estimated 150 unarmed civilians were then gunned down.”²⁰² However, this was hardly the extent of what happened in any of the sub-hamlets of Son My. The crimes committed by Task Force Barker during the attack occurred in several different sub-hamlets. They included killing individual farmers working in rice paddies outside the sub-hamlets and shooting down people traveling on roadways and paths, both from the ground and from the air. They included beating, maiming, and torturing civilians. The bodies of some victims were mutilated. Sexual violence was rampant: according to testimony and examinations of victims after the attack, at least twenty women and girls were raped, often multiple times by different men before meeting horrible deaths.²⁰³ Well water was intentionally spoiled with dead bodies, food stores and livestock were destroyed, and houses burned. People were shot despite begging for mercy while others were killed trying to escape. Some suspects were captured and tortured for information and eventually killed, others met a similar fate for no apparent reason.²⁰⁴ In the midst of these terrible crimes that by most accounts resulted in hundreds of deaths, some members of the first and second platoons of C Company rounded up large groups of people and murdered them with hails of machinegun fire. Spotting the drainage ditch full of bodies, Hugh Thompson recalls drawing parallel to Nazi crimes from the Second World War and the sight eventually drove him

²⁰¹ Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 326-7.

²⁰² Harry G. Summers, *Vietnam War Almanac*, 257. He adds that “murder, rape, sodomy, and other atrocities” were committed throughout the day, but his focus is clearly on Calley’s platoon, and specifically the gathering of victims.

²⁰³ Gina Marie Weaver, *Ideologies of Forgetting: Rape in the Vietnam War* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 75.

²⁰⁴ RDAR Volume 1, 2-2, 2-3, 6-3, 6-5, 6-7 – 6-9, 6-16.

to intervene.²⁰⁵ This last horrible act – the act of herding people into a ditch and killing them en masse – is the act Lewy and Summers refer to and the act for which the ‘My Lai massacre’ is most known. It, however, was one aspect of the attack on Son My. It was atrocious in its own way because of the calculated manner in which the GIs worked together to maximize their killing efficiency, but in the end it was merely part of a spectrum of violence that was administered by Task Force Barker. There is little doubt that the mass murders in the ditch outside the sub-hamlet are unique in terms of scale for face-to-face killing of civilians by Americans during the war; few people claim otherwise. But there is little purpose in defining the massacre so narrowly other than to falsely characterize the entire medley of violence as exceptional.²⁰⁶ If the men who conducted the mass executions had instead exercised more discretion and killed like everyone else as they found their victims, would it not still have been a massacre? For the men immersed in their acts of sexual violence during the mass slaughter, it may very well have been a normal operation away from the view of piles of bodies at the east edge of Thuan Yen. In reference to missions involving beatings, torture and razing villages Stanley Karnow explained, “these were routine missions, not outrageous atrocities like the Mylai [sic] massacre.”²⁰⁷ It appears, however, that at least according to this assessment and much of the testimony in the Peers Report, a good deal of the carnage in Son My was “routine.” It is simply too reductive to allow this one act of extreme violence to characterize the ‘My Lai

²⁰⁵ Interview with Hugh Thompson in “Four Hours in My Lai,” directed by Kevin Sim, 1989. Others have made the same comparison. Ronald Ridenhour interviewed in the same documentary. Michael Terry, a member of 3rd Platoon C Company, in an interview by Seymour Hersh. Hersh, “Hamlet Attack Called ‘Point-Blank Murder’” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 20 November, 1969, 1. Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 23.

²⁰⁶ Narrowing the massacres in Son My to the mass killings pictured in some of Haeberle’s photographs is part of a “visual tradition” in the West in which mass death is portrayed and seen as a non-Western way to die according to George H. Roeder. It is an expression of the culture assumption captured in Westmoreland’s musings about the low value of life in the East. George H. Roeder, *The Censored War: American Visual Experience During World War Two* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 144.

²⁰⁷ Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 468.

massacre,' yet such a characterization persists. Furthermore, it does not stand to reason that the massacre is merely characterized this way because of the very fact that mass killings on this scale are what make it unique. There are other aspects of the mission that, strictly on that basis of scale and the assumption of uniqueness, could be used to characterize it. It could be a mass rape, for example, but this is equally problematic for the same reasons. What makes the massacre unique is the public revelation and investigation of this particular concentration of entitled wanton violence by US troops, and the American response to it.

Answering the old question of whether the My Lai massacre was an aberration is very much dependent upon how one defines the massacre. If the uniqueness of the massacre is dependent upon a very narrow scope of events, then there is something extremely cynical or dishonest about claims that it was exceptional. The moniker 'massacre' does not appear to be much related to the number of fatalities. The four deaths at Kent State in May 1970 at the hands of the Ohio National Guard are sometimes referred to as a massacre. Philip Caputo, writing on this very subject, claims the status of 'massacre' is assigned to an atrocity, not for the number of victims, but for the "wanton manner in which they were shot down."²⁰⁸ Wanton killing was the order of the day in Son My, and it was certainly not exclusive to the 1st platoon. Furthermore, that abhorrent behaviour was brought to the village by the Americal Division, it was not born there, nor did it end there. By this standard 'massacres' were a regular occurrence during the war. The status of the mission as a 'massacre' also sometimes hinges on the victims having been 'innocent' civilians, and the sub-hamlet unresisting or undefended. Daniel Ellsberg addressed this point and the question of how common such events were in Vietnam when he told a

²⁰⁸ Philip Caputo, "Wounded Kent Students Says Troops Erred" Chicago Tribune Press Service, Reproduced in "The Kent State Shootings, 35 Years Later," NPR.org. Online: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4630596>. Accessed 12 February, 2014.

Congressional conference “if My Lai was still exceptional, it was separated only by a very fine distinction from incidents that occur regularly and that are regarded as permissible. A few shots from the village, a few uniforms found in a hut, a measure of resistance, would have removed any question about what happened at My Lai.”²⁰⁹ One may also fairly assume that had the first and Second platoons of C Company carried on like the rest of the men of Task Force Barker and not grouped their victims together, the results would have been different and much more ambiguous had an investigation even been prompted. The infamous photographs that surfaced after the story broke might be one of the few unique aspects of what happen in Son My that March morning, other than, of course, the attention afforded it in America.

Who

The micro-level focus on the details of individuals perpetuates an interpretation of the My Lai Massacre in which those details play far too pivotal a role. Too much attention is paid to characters, particularly William Calley’s. Of course, the trial did occupy a great deal of the press’s and public’s attention, and there is no doubt that there are interesting and important things to say about Calley, the trial, and the public’s reaction to it. But the domestic issues are separate from what actually happened in Son My, yet Calley often maintains the central role, even in narratives of the massacre. This is partly a result of the way the American media portrayed the story initially. Calley’s portrait graced the cover of *Time* magazine twice: in

²⁰⁹ Daniel Ellsberg speaking before the Congressional Conference on War and National Responsibility, 1970. Cited in Nicholas Turse, “‘Kill Anything That Moves’: U.S. War Crimes and Atrocities in Vietnam, 1965-1973” 160. Ellsberg is of course most well-known for leaking the Pentagon Papers and becoming an outspoken antiwar activist after leaving the Pentagon. He is often cited (out of context) by conservatives arguing the massacre was exceptional because just prior to this passage he said the massacre was “beyond the bounds of permissible behaviour, and that is recognized by virtually every soldier in Vietnam.” For example, see Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 327; Norman Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam*, 188; B.G. Burkett and Glenna Whitley, *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation Was Robbed of its Heroes and its History*, 128; Mackubin Thomas Owens, “But Was it True?” *National Review*, 23 February, 2004, 36.

December 1969, with the question “Where does the Guilt Lie?”, and again in April 1971 with the question, “Who Shares the Guilt?” *Newsweek* superimposed Calley’s portrait over a photo of a heap of bodies for one cover image. In another, his head and shoulders filled the cover with the text, “The Killings at Song My,” and “Accused: Lt. William L. Calley Jr.” Kendrick Oliver suggests that American media outlets, in an attempt to make the story more accessible, reduced the scope to little more than Calley and his actions and cast it in terms of a personal drama with him in the leading role.²¹⁰ Long before Oliver’s observations, Richard Hammer made a similar critique of the way Calley was popularly conceived. “Almost everyone wanted to make [Calley] more than he was,” he wrote, “wanted in a large sense to turn him into a symbol and as a symbol to reject or accept what they saw him standing for.”²¹¹ Ultimately Calley became synonymous with the massacre. Thus sources of causation were naturally sought in his character, or in the platoon and company of which he was a part. The narrow focus on Calley in the media and public consciousness has survived into current popular representations of the war as well in much of the historiography of the war. Interest in Calley, or the individuals of ‘C Company’, particularly through the 1980s, has been encouraged by particular conservative impulses such as the attempts to unify a positive memory of the war with patriotism and reverence for veterans, and their emphasis on individual culpability. Sanitizing the war has always been the primary reason for containing culpability.

It is not surprising that contemporary conservative responses to the massacre have survived into the revisionist history of the war, but it is surprising that many components of these responses remain in the mainstream of Vietnam War historiography and memory. Calley’s image closes a fifty second passage on My Lai in the popular thirteen part series, “Vietnam: A

²¹⁰ Kendrick Oliver, *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory*, 55-56, 58.

²¹¹ Richard Hammer, *The Court-Martial of Lt. Calley*, 375.

Television History.” The narrator explains that he was the only one convicted of a crime.²¹² No further information or analysis is offered. James S. Olson and Randy Roberts write that Calley led the platoon into the “hamlet”, he gave the orders, and “Calley suddenly opened fire and ordered his men to shoot as well.”²¹³ This is almost a complete fabrication that rests on a very narrow definition of the massacre. In fact, the massacre started well before Calley’s platoon even entered the village. When the first Platoon did enter Thuan Yen, Calley and a radio operator were following behind the rest of the men and several civilians had already been brutally murdered.²¹⁴ George Herring mistakenly puts Calley in command of the entire *company* in his version of events without mentioning any other names.²¹⁵ Charles DeBenedetti and Charles Chatfield similarly mistakenly put Calley in command of the GIs who committed the massacre in the “hamlet of Mylai near Songmy.”²¹⁶ Gerald J. DeGroot ambiguously writes that “members of Company C, Task Force Barker, a battalion-sized unit of the Americal Division commanded by Lieutenant William Calley, murdered some 350 unarmed civilians.” Does DeGroot mean Calley commanded C Company, or merely the troops that did the killing in “My Lai” (neither of which is entirely true)? This passage is also reprinted in the heavily circulated *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War* textbook.²¹⁷ Marilyn Young attributes the massacre to single platoon, and in a later passage, without any indication that there might have been something wrong with the Army’s decision, specifies that it decided to hold Calley

²¹² “Homefront USA,” *Vietnam: A Television History*, WGBH Educational Foundation, 1983.

²¹³ James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell*, 228. This is rather bizarre because Olson and Roberts also co-wrote a very good educational compilation of primary source material related to the My Lai. Within the sources they cite there is plenty of evidence to refute such a simplistic version of the events in Thuan Yen. James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, *My Lai: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1998).

²¹⁴ RDAR Volume 1, 6-7.

²¹⁵ George Herring, *America’s Longest War: the United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 212.

²¹⁶ Charles DeBenedetti, Charles Chatfield, assisting author, *An American Ordeal: The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam Era* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 265.

²¹⁷ Gerald J. DeGroot, *A Noble Cause? America and the Vietnam War*, 295. Robert J. McMahon ed. *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War* fourth edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008), 270.

responsible for the massacre.²¹⁸ The entry for “My Lai” in *The Dictionary of the Vietnam War* edited by James Olson (the entry is written by Sally Smith) misleadingly states that “[u]pon entering the village... Calley ordered his men to round up all of the civilians at the center of the village.” Although Smith notes that there are differing accounts she writes, “It seems that Calley opened fire...and ordered his men to do the same.”²¹⁹ In their exposé of Tiger Force atrocities Michael Sallah and Mitch Weiss put Calley in command of the entire brigade.²²⁰ More recently the Pentagon produced a Vietnam War Commemoration Interactive Timeline on its website that offers an entry for the 16 March, 1968. The entry is dominated by a photo of Calley, beside which there are three sentences stating that as many as five hundred civilians were killed, for which fourteen men were charged, but only Calley was found guilty.²²¹ Each sentence is factual, but when these select bits of information are yanked from their context and assembled in this manner they paint a picture of an isolated criminal act for which the primary perpetrator was convicted. Without further analysis or explanation, readers of these works, (most of whom are probably students) are left with an extremely limited misunderstanding of Task Force Barker’s

²¹⁸ Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990*, 243, 255-6.

²¹⁹ Sally Smith, “My Lai” in *Dictionary of the Vietnam War*, 293-4. Recall that Roberts and Olson wrote a similar account in *Where the Domino Fell*. The majority of testimonies are much different than Smith’s description of events. For example see RDAR Volume 2 Book 25, Stanley-43-44; Sledge-10-12 (Sledge was Calley’s Radio Telephone Operator and was close by Calley. Sledge describes a point at which Calley gave orders to kill a large group of civilians, but this was long after he had witnessed many other killings.)

²²⁰ Michael Sallah and Mitch Weiss, *Tiger Force: A True Story of Men and War* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2006), 216.

²²¹ Department of Defense, Vietnam War Commemoration, Interactive Timeline, “March 16, 1969, Americal Division Kills Hundreds of Vietnamese Civilians at My Lai” 2012. <http://www.vietnamwar50th.com/timeline/#/page/24/details/293>. Accessed 4 March, 2014. Initially the title of the entry was “My Lai Incident” and the passage stated that “Elements of the Americal Division...killed more than two hundred civilians in the hamlet of My Lai. Eventually, one member of the division was tried and found guilty of war crimes.” Sometime early in 2014 the title and text was updated. Ben Alpers, “Quality Control for Online History” U.S. Intellectual History Blog, 3 March, 2014. <http://s-usih.org/2014/03/quality-control-for-online-history.html> Accessed, 4 March, 2014. Also see Nick Turse, “Tomgram: Nick Turse, The Pentagon Makes History the First Casualty” TomDispatch.com, 18 February, 2014. http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/175808/tomgram%3Anick_turse%2C_the_pentagon_makes_history_the_first_casualty Accessed 4 March, 2014.

atrocities and an exaggeration of Calley's role. To be clear, Calley murdered and raped with the worst of the men, and did so seemingly without remorse (at least until very recently).²²²

Scapegoat or not, there is little to be gained from engaging in this particular debate or focussing on Calley because there are no broad answers to be found in his particular character. The attention he has received under the guise of assessing the massacre is unwarranted. What is interesting, from an analytical standpoint, is the way in which the actions of a three company Task Force with the help of divisional upper command can continually be reduced in this manner, even within a historiography that purports to have been born out of the antiwar movement. Reading account after account of the massacre in orthodox historiography is numbing because of the weariness of the text: the repetition of the same mistakes and factual errors belies an intellectual curiosity regarding the massacre, let alone moral questions it raises about the war.

Writers who are committed to the conservative project of revising the history of the war address the massacre on similar terms, however, they are more explicit in their individualist arguments. Recall that conservatives such as Buckley were eager to locate the source of the problem away from the broader war (against communism) and in the drug-addled behaviour of the individual soldiers whose moral compasses had gone awry. In a similar fashion since then revisionists have sought to cleanse the memory of the war. In his oft-cited analysis of atrocities in Vietnam, Lewy argues the problem was the result of low standards of recruitment. Atrocities committed during the war were simply a problem of criminal deviance. The statistics bear his claim he argues: of the marines who were tried for misconduct during the war, they averaged

²²² In 2009 Calley made the news again when he spoke publicly about the how he feels about what happened in Son My. To a room Kiwanis Club members he said, "There is not a day that goes by that I do not feel remorse for what happened that day in My Lai." "Ex-Officer Apologizes For Killings At My Lai" *New York Times* 23 August, 2009, 24.

only ten years of “formal education,” were “mentally below average,” and often came from “broken homes.” Accordingly, these men were “ill-suited for the exacting demands of counterinsurgency war.”²²³ Robert F. Turner also emphasises the criminality of the soldiers in My Lai by explaining that “[w]hen you take millions of young men..., you are likely to deploy a certain number of individuals who would be rapists, murderers, or other social misfits wherever they were located.” Therefore, according to Turner, My Lai was simply a reflection of the normal likelihood of criminal deviance in society. He follows this thought with an insistence that it was an aberration “in strong contrast” to the rest of the soldiers in Vietnam, and reminds his readers of the “great debt” owed to those Americans who died in the war.²²⁴ Turner’s analysis of My Lai demonstrates how an exceptionalist interpretation of the massacre is related to conservative revisionism. B.G. Burkett also attributes the massacre to “Calley and his platoon.” He too emphasizes the character flaws of Calley and the rest of C Company. “Calley,” he argues “was one of those men who should never have been thrust into a position of leadership....He was a criminal.” Yet Burkett provides some explanation for how so many of the ‘social misfits’ to whom he and Turner attribute the massacre wound up in the same division (something Turner does not address). During the Vietnam War, he explains, the Americal Division served as a sort of army cesspool for “antisocial behavior, drug users, alcoholics, and racists.” The My Lai Massacre was, in his view, the result of a concentration of weakness, immorality, and incompetence within a single unit. He denies any of the soldiers in C Company were “a victim of U.S. military policy.”²²⁵ The army’s fault, in Burkett’s view, is to be found in

²²³ Guenter Lewy *America in Vietnam*, 330-331.

²²⁴ Robert F. Turner, “How Political Warfare Caused America to Snatch Defeat from the Jaws of Victory in Vietnam” in *The Real Lessons of the Vietnam War: Reflections Twenty-Five Years after the fall of Saigon* (North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2002), 243.

²²⁵ B.G. Burkett and Glenna Whitley, *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation Was Robbed of its Heroes and its History*, 116-117.

the training of these particular men, or rather its inability to reform them, and in the way the Americal Division was replenished with unwanted troops from other divisions. Emphasizing the character of the soldiers who stormed through Son My on foot that day accentuates the behavioural elements of the story, often at the expense of considering broader structural arguments. Such a focus parallels the official Department of Defence reaction to accusations of further atrocities in the war: “Individual lapses in human behavior occasionally do occur, and when isolated instances of improper behavior come to light, prompt appropriate action is taken.”²²⁶

The frequent claim that the roots of the massacre could be found in inadequate Army training and leadership is worth closer examination. Guenter Lewy placed the most blame for American atrocities in Vietnam on a lack of good leadership, “especially at the company and platoon level.” Concluding that the massacre was the result of inadequate army training appears at first glance like a systemic or structural argument that relieves the troops in question of a degree of personal responsibility: a rather non-conservative conclusion considering the emphasis conservatives such as Buckley placed on individual agency in the case. Buckley and other conservatives looked at matters of criminality through the lens of individual values and behaviour, which explains the link they sought between their critique of religious values among many young Americans and criminal conduct at home and in Vietnam. However, locating the source of the massacre in army training places the moral burden fully on the soldiers and absolves the Army of all but a mistake – a mistake that some army pundits have handed off to the civilian strategists. This conclusion rests on the premise that such an atrocity was only possible because the ability and willingness to commit such atrocities existed within the soldiers

²²⁶ Department of Defense, letter to Mark O. Hatfield, Congressional Correspondence. As cited in Nicholas Turse, “‘Kill Anything That Moves’: U.S. War Crimes and Atrocities in Vietnam, 1965-1973” 13-14.

and occurred because the Army did not ‘train’ such behavioural impulses out of them; it was the result of ill-discipline. According to this view, the massacre was something the soldiers did in defiance of the Army. It also ignores the potential for contradiction between this idealized notion of training for war and the more immediate unwritten code of conduct shared on the ground. The idea that the My Lai Massacre was an aberration and that it was the result of inadequate training are fully compatible. Accordingly, the occurrence of the massacre comes down to the individual failings of those particular men – they, for whatever reason – did not have the personal fortitude to keep together in the situation without the benefit of proper training. The same is true regarding claims that the massacre was the result of poor leadership and a deterioration of command within TF Barker. Here too, the suggestion appears to be shifting responsibility for the massacre up the chain of command, but in fact it obscures a more likely cause, and it is based on the premise that the mission did not go as planned. Emphasis is ultimately placed on the frustrated troops and their incompetent company and task force level leadership. The argument about poor leadership regarding the Son My attack is rarely extended to include the leadership responsible for relaxing the rules of engagement in Quang Ngai province – a point that is only briefly touched on by the Peers Report.²²⁷

The emphasis placed on the characters of the men and their ‘crazed’ role in the massacre in popular memory (and many academic sources) is precisely the issue that frustrated Ronald Ridenhour when he insisted the massacre was not some isolated spasm of violence but rather “It was where an operation occurred and where there were two massacres.... [T]his was an operation, not an aberration.... What happened at My Lai was a plan. We have two massacres,

²²⁷ RDAR Volume 1, 8-5. Bernd Greiner, *War Without Fronts: the USA in Vietnam*, 201.

remember, on the same day, by two separate companies....This was an act of counterterrorism, and that fact was completely lost” by the media and in the popular history of the massacre.²²⁸

Soldiers’ Stories

Beyond ideological motivations for an individualist argument regarding the massacre, there are more prosaic reasons such arguments are perpetuated. Part of the reason for the focus of so much attention on individual soldiers is a widespread macabre fascination with people who commit such atrocious acts. Interviews with active participants fulfill a sensationalist curiosity and make successful television and newsprint. Mike Wallace’s interview with Paul Meadlo, one of the GIs from the first platoon of C Company, is famous for the candid way Meadlo answered Wallace’s questions, particularly regarding the killing of babies.²²⁹ With some financial encouragement from *Esquire* magazine Calley agreed to let John Sack write a highly sympathetic memoir. It was based on exclusive interviews Calley granted Sack during which Sack claims to have asked almost ten thousand questions. Parts of the memoirs were also printed in the magazine with a ghastly cover photo of Calley smiling with four Asian children, posed like a family portrait.²³⁰ A number of the early interviews and publications were not much more than attempts to monetize a hot news story. Many people found something captivating in the confessions of the men who were present and participated in the massacre, thus their personal stories occupied a disproportionate amount of airtime and column-inches relative to analysis of less human institutional elements of the story.

²²⁸ David L. Anderson, *Facing My Lai: Moving Beyond the Massacre*, 41, 56.

²²⁹ “Transcript of Interview of Vietnam War Veteran on His Role in Alleged Massacre of Civilians at Songmy” *New York Times*, 25 November, 1969, 16.

²³⁰ John Sack, *Body Count: Lieutenant Calley’s Story* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1970), 1. *Esquire* November 1970. See Appendix 1, Image 2.

The authoritative voice of documentaries sometimes lends more significance to the recollections of the participants than is warranted. Television documentaries on “My Lai” have primarily focused on interviews with the participating soldiers on the ground. Soldiers are often granted a privileged voice on matters of combat and so their accounts of events tend to carry substantial weight. Philip Caputo, an author and a veteran himself, claims that veterans of the Vietnam War are the “only people who have a *right* to say anything against the war.”²³¹ Similarly, Stephen E. Ambrose, speaking on the subject of My Lai, insists “the first thing that those of us who have never been in combat have to recognize is that no one who has never been in combat has a right to judge.”²³² Several soldiers who participated in the massacre at Thuan Yen have given interviews in which they, not surprisingly, characterize the situation as one that was out of control. Their narratives of the events leading up to the massacre, and their individual roles have been repeated so often in the press and historiography of the massacre (and to a lesser degree, the war), that they tend to overshadow more removed and objective perspectives. In this regard the story of the massacre becomes an amalgam of the actions of individual soldiers. In the absence of similar accounts from other atrocities their stories remain very singular and unique. John Fitzgerald makes a similar observation about the 1972 documentary, *Winter Soldier*, based on the hearings by the same name held in Detroit in 1971. He writes that “[t]he power of the individual testimonies in the documentary in some way obstructs the hearings’ objective of placing atrocities like My Lai in a larger chain of responsibility. *Winter Soldier* focuses on the actions of soldiers who did things considered illegal according to the military’s

²³¹ A.D. Horne, ed. *The Wounded Generation: America After Vietnam* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1981), 116 as quoted in Keith Beattie, *The Scar that Binds: American Culture and the Vietnam War* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 81.

²³² Stephen E. Ambrose quoted in David L. Anderson, *Facing My Lai: Moving Beyond the Massacre*, 109.

own code of conduct, avoiding a larger critique of U.S. government policy.”²³³ PBS’s highly regarded and popular *American Experience* television series features a “My Lai” episode in which a large portion of the program consists of interviews with soldiers, many of whom were in Thuan Yen during the massacre. The documentary tells the standard story about ‘Charlie Company’ through the voices of the former soldiers. The men were “a cross-section of just your general, basic young people at that point in time.” They bonded into “a close-knit group” in training, then were shipped to Quang Ngai, a region with “a reputation... for hating foreign occupying forces.” Soon casualties began to mount from “booby traps, mines, [and] snipers”: “They were being picked off one by one....This went on for several weeks.” Morale broke down, they began “to hate and the hatred [became] very intense and very real.... Finally... the rules of the game...changed....[W]e’re not nice guys anymore.” When the troops were brief the night before the attack, they were “psyched [for a] chance to confront the enemy; it was an opportunity for revenge.” When they entered the village the situation spiraled “out of control.”²³⁴ The storyline is built mostly from the recollections of participants. Thomas Partsch, an enlisted soldier of the second platoon of C Company recalled “At first nobody did anything, then a couple crazy guys said ‘Hey, they must be VC.’ Some of the guys started shooting.”²³⁵ Similarly Fred Widmer, a GI from C Company, said “once the first civilian was killed it was too late, period.”²³⁶ Their statements seem to corroborate each other’s to paint a picture of something that went wrong and was beyond control, but they situate a great deal of the problem in the psyche of their fellow GIs. Their own confessions, or their witness ‘testimony’ in the interviews carries far more weight than any of the opinions they offer regarding the role of upper command

²³³ John J. Fitzgerald, “The Winter Soldier Hearings” *Radical History Review* 97 (2007), 121.

²³⁴ *PBS American Experience: My Lai*, directed by Barak Goodman (WGBH Educational foundation, 2010).

²³⁵ *PBS American Experience: My Lai*.

²³⁶ *PBS American Experience: My Lai*.

and its responsibility along with broader war fighting policies. The documentary *Four Hours in My Lai*, produced by Kevin Sim (one of the authors of the book by the same name), is very similar in this regard. A large portion of it consists of clips from an interview with Varnado Simpson, one of the GIs who participated in killings in Thuan Yen. His mental state during the interviews was so devastated that it is difficult to watch objectively.²³⁷ He too claims to have lost control of himself during the attack.

Not all soldiers' accounts of atrocities were received equally though. When veterans not involved in the Son My attacks spoke out about similar atrocities they did not receive the sustained attention of the press and investigators, let alone the public. The Winter Soldier Investigations (WSI) is a case in point. The WSI was organized by the Vietnam Veterans Against the War partly in response to the My Lai case, with the explicit intention of providing evidence to the public that atrocities such as those committed in Son My were "no unusual occurrence."²³⁸ According to Andrew E. Hunt's study of the VVAW, aside from numerous accounts of atrocities committed by Americans in Vietnam, original evidence was provided by speakers regarding American forces operating in Laos, another large-scale massacre of civilians, and the toxicity of the defoliant Agent Orange.²³⁹ The event was held in the midst of the My Lai scandal and Calley's very public trial, yet it was barely covered by major national press outlets. The *New York Times* did not report on the event until a week after it ended, and the story was a single column on page seventeen with scant details and a suggestion that the soldiers' accounts

²³⁷ *Four Hours in My Lai*, directed by Kevin Sim (Yorkshire Television, 1989)

²³⁸ William Crandell, "Opening Statement," Winter Soldier Investigation, Vietnam Veterans Against the War, 31 January, 1971. Online: http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Resources/Primary/Winter_Soldier/WS_02_opening.html. Accessed 5 February, 2014.

²³⁹ Andrew E. Hunt, *The Turning: A History of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 72.

were old news.²⁴⁰ The *Washington Post* did not report on it. CBS was the only television network to even mention the Winter Soldier Investigation, but coverage was brief.²⁴¹ Despite the almost total lack of coverage by the national media Burkett cites coverage of the WSI as a particularly egregious case of the press jumping on atrocity stories without practicing due diligence.²⁴² The lack of national coverage has been partly attributed to the fact that the event was held in Detroit instead of Washington DC or New York.²⁴³ While there may be some truth to this claim, it certainly does not support the claim that the national press was, in the words of Buckley, ‘atrocity hunting.’ Furthermore, the authenticity of the participants’ stories has come under attack in the years since then based on flimsy and mostly undocumented evidence.²⁴⁴ My Lai was a big story, but it did not mean there was a new widespread willingness to accept such stories if they were not accompanied by indisputable photographic evidence.

Photographs

On 20 November 1969 Ron Haeberle’s personal photographs of some of the victims in Thuan Yen were published in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, then again in colour by *Life* magazine on 5 December. Haeberle’s photographs are among the most famous images from the war; they share the company of Nick Ut’s photograph of children running from a napalm attack, Eddie Adams’s image of General Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing a suspect, and Hugh Van E’s image of the evacuees clamoring for a helicopter on the roof of a Saigon building. These images have

²⁴⁰ Jerry M. Flint, “Veterans Assess Atrocity Blame” *New York Times*, 7 February, 1971, 17. See also Nicholas Turse, “‘Kill Anything That Moves’: U.S. War Crimes and Atrocities in Vietnam, 1965-1973” 558-559.

²⁴¹ Nicholas Turse, “‘Kill Anything That Moves’: U.S. War Crimes and Atrocities in Vietnam, 1965-1973” 559. Also see Andrew E. Hunt, *The Turning: A History of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War*, 72. *Life* magazine ran a story on the WSI in July, 1971: Donald Jackson, “Confessions of the Winter Soldiers” *Life* 71-2, 9 July, 1971, 22-27.

²⁴² B.G. Burkett and Glenna Whitley, *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation Was Robbed of its Heroes and its History*, 113.

²⁴³ Andrew E. Hunt, *The Turning: A History of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War*, 72-73.

²⁴⁴ See n.331.

been disseminated so widely and reused so frequently that they have taken on symbolic meanings beyond merely representing the specific acts they depict. Marita Sturken argues they maintain their power, not only because of their deeply troubling subject matter, but because they have come to represent specific components of a popular narrative of the war. In the case of the My Lai images she explains this is due to their graphic depiction of “terror and American atrocities in intimate detail.”²⁴⁵ As Patrick Hagopian has commented, the images are remaining emblems of the immorality of the war that have outlasted public discourse on the subject they encapsulate, and thus their significance is apparently amplified.²⁴⁶ With the passing of public discourse, in some respects the photos take on the role of symbolizing the discourse as much as the acts they depict. That is, not only do they symbolize specific characteristics of the war, but they also symbolize arguments or sentiments about the war. This is particularly the case with the reuse of Haeberle’s images by the Art Workers’ Coalition. They used one of the most graphic images from Haeberle’s set for a well-known antiwar poster.²⁴⁷ In this regard the meaning of the images has become less clear through the passing of time. Of course, the images continue to conjure memories of the immorality of aspects of the war in later times; however, this symbolism

²⁴⁵ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, The Aids Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California, 1997), 93, 94. It is interesting that at the same time the photos depict elements of a popular narrative, the popular narrative also limits what the photographs are allowed to depict. A perfect example of this is Haeberle’s exposure #18A: it is widely thought to depict a terrifying moment before the people in the image were murdered, but it also depicts a horrifying moment after a sexual assault. Given how often the photograph is reprinted it is surprising how few people have noted this fact, and the limited meaning the photograph carries as a result. This is despite the fact that one of the first widely distributed accounts of the massacre told the story. See “My Lai: An American Tragedy” *Time* 94-23, 5 December, 1969, 29-39. Also see Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975), 107. A similar point has recently been raised by Valerie Wieskamp in “My Lai, Sexual Assault and the Black Blouse Girl: Forty-Five Years Later, One of America’s Most Iconic Photos Hides Truth in Plain Sight” *BagNews* 29 October, 2013. Online: <http://www.bagnewsnotes.com/2013/10/my-lai-sexual-assault-and-the-black-blouse-girl-forty-five-years-later-one-of-america%E2%80%99s-most-iconic-photos-hides-truth-in-plain-sight/>. Accessed 10 April, 2014.

²⁴⁶ Patrick Hagopian “Vietnam War Photography as a Locus of Memory,” in *Locating Memory: Photographic Acts* ed. Annetta Kuhn and Kirsten Emiko McAllister (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 219.

²⁴⁷ See Appendix 1, Image 3.

has been obfuscated by the contentious nature of public discourse regarding various revisions of the memory of the war. Merely suggesting the images might symbolize something broader than the specific acts they depict is likely to elicit charges of slander by those who wish to recuperate the Vietnam War in American memory.

There are few other known photographs that depict scenes similar to those of Haeberle's committed by Americans, thus his images stand alone seemingly corroborating this type of indiscriminate American brutality in Vietnam War narratives. Susan Sontag suggests that the importance of such images is as much related to the way they represent and secure an aspect of a collective memory of something – in this case America's role in the Vietnam War - as it is to the actual depiction.²⁴⁸ However, there is a degree of irony to this observation and the way the massacre has been remembered. Although the photographs helped convince a skeptical public that something 'dark and bloody' did in fact occur, their mass reproduction through all forms of media continually since 1969 has greatly emphasised an exceptionalist interpretation of the massacre. Further emphasis comes from the rarity of similar images. Sontag writes of the way photographs and memory intersect: "The problem is not that people remember through photographs, but that they remember only the photographs.... To remember is, more and more, not to recall a story but to be able to call up a picture."²⁴⁹ This may be the primary reason the massacre in My Hoi is virtually forgotten in comparison to Thuan Yen.²⁵⁰ In this regard the images of the My Lai Massacre, being the only images of such an atrocity known to have been taken during the war, stand out as *the* images of *the* massacre. This is echoing the point that Nick Turse has made about the massacre: the attention My Lai receives in lieu of other atrocities

²⁴⁸ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 86.

²⁴⁹ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 89.

²⁵⁰ Mark J. Taylor, "The Massacre at My Khe 4: A Different Story" 237.

distorts the history of the war with regards to the regularity of similar atrocities during the war, or even their occurrence.²⁵¹ Son My was not the only atrocity or massacre, but the emphasis on this set of crimes, driven by the continual regurgitation of the photographic evidence, perpetuates an exceptionalist model of atrocity during the war. In this way the photos work to cast the massacre as an exceptional event in the war in a passive non-ideological manner, but they are also sometimes used to advance an argument.

Initially there were some who refused to accept the photographs as proof of American atrocities. Barry Goldwater told a NBC television interviewer that the photographs were not strong enough evidence to support the unbelievable claim that American GIs had massacred civilians.²⁵² For others interested in advancing an exceptionalist argument about the massacre the significance of the My Lai photographs lies in the fact that they are the only photographs of their type. According to this view, the photographic evidence is not evidence of massacres during the war, but instead evidence there was *a* massacre. This is a perfectly reasonable assertion that is sometimes subtly overextended to imply that, due to the nature of press reporting during the war, the uniqueness of the photos strongly suggests there were no other massacres. In December 1969 Buckley anticipated that news of the massacre would prompt an “atrocities campaign” he sardonically called the “great atrocities hunt” for which the press would “fan out over Vietnam in search of atrocity stories.... The photographs will be amazing, and we will have to take them on faith.”²⁵³ Almost ten years later Lewy similarly referred to the same imagined

²⁵¹ Nicholas Turse, “‘Kill Anything That Moves’: U.S. War Crimes and Atrocities in Vietnam, 1965-1973” 158. Also Nick Turse, *Kill anything that Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam*, 13.

²⁵² “In Interview Sen Goldwater Discusses My Lai Incident,” 20 November, 1969, NBCUniversal Archives. Online: http://www.nbcuniversalarchives.com/nbcuni/clip/5112466997_s01.do. Accessed 20 August, 2013. Goldwater’s position was not unique; several interviewees expressed similar scepticism in *WSJ* press report. “Assessing Songmy [sic]: Doves Recoil by Hawks Tend to See ‘Massacre’ as Just a Part of War” *Wall Street Journal* 1 December, 1969, 1.

²⁵³ William F. Buckley, “The Great Atrocities Hunt” *National Review* 16 December, 1969, 1254.

band of atrocity hounds as the “war crimes industry.”²⁵⁴ He argued that opposition to the war encouraged soldiers and the press to reveal such crimes and since very few were revealed, they probably did not happen at anywhere near the rate supposed by those making the claims.

Although he does admit that the lack of similar court-martial records does not mean there were no other atrocities comparable to those in Son My, he does so by first reiterating the idea that My Lai gave encouragement to soldiers to report atrocities, and second, by stipulating a very narrow definition of what constituted the atrocities in Son My.²⁵⁵ Both Buckley and Lewy were making arguments that rested on the conservative premise that the American press was (and is) rabidly liberal and antiwar. In light of all the searching for atrocities by the antiwar press, the reasoning goes, the lone My Lai photos stand as evidence of the uniqueness of the massacre. It is highly unlikely “given the number of antiwar journalists reporting on Vietnam,” explains Podhoretz in 1982, “that if other such atrocities had occurred, they could have been kept secret.”²⁵⁶ However, there was then evidence of mass civilian deaths such as Kevin Buckley’s reporting on operation Speedy Express and the WSI. There is now much more evidence in the VWCWG files suggesting such atrocities were far more common than many pundits inferred from a single set of photos.

The News

Examining the way the massacre actually came to light is revealing. Of the several hundred people who must have known something of the massacres, many of whom had intimate knowledge of them, only one witness reported it and his report was concealed within the army.

²⁵⁴ Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 311

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 326-327.

²⁵⁶ Norman Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam*, 188.

The only other person to report was Ridenhour and he was not even involved. A small army press release on 6 September, 1969 stating that Calley would be charged with murdering an unspecified number of civilians went virtually unnoticed. Haeberle meanwhile concealed his personal photographs depicting the massacre (and destroyed those depicting Americans in the act). On a couple of occasions he did show his photos privately to some local groups, however the audiences generally expressed denial that Americans would do such a thing, and resentment towards Haeberle for suggesting as much.²⁵⁷ There was considerable resistance among press outlets to publish stories about the massacre written by either Ron Ridenhour or Seymour Hersh. Various supposedly liberal publications declined stories by both men. Ridenhour offered the story via a writer's agent to numerous outlets including "major newspapers in Boston and New York, three national magazines, two news agencies and at least one of the three major television networks." In all cases the outlets refused the story and discouraged his agent from further involving himself in the matter.²⁵⁸ Hersh offered his story to *Life* and *Look* magazine: both declined it.²⁵⁹ Hersh eventually sold his story to Dispatch News Service and it ran in thirty-two papers on 13 November, 1969. Even given the shocking nature of his story, it was merely reprinted with no independent follow-up investigation by all but the *New York Times*.²⁶⁰ It is clear that prior to the massacre becoming a national story the mainstream press had little interest in atrocity stories that cast Americans as the perpetrators. A week later Haeberle sold some of his images to the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and then later to *Life*, and the story became a national scandal.

²⁵⁷ Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 242.

²⁵⁸ Christopher Lydon, "'Pinkville' Gadfly Ronald Lee Ridenhour" *New York Times*, 29 November, 1969, 14.

²⁵⁹ Seymour Hersh, "The Story Everyone Ignored" *Columbia Journalism Review*, (Winter 1969/1970), 56.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 56. Henry Kamm, "Vietnamese Say G.I.'s Slew 567 in Town" *New York Times*, 17 November, 1969, 1.

Once the massacre was revealed to the press there was a rise in the number of new accusations by soldiers, just as conservative critics have argued, but news of these accusations made nothing like the groundswell in mainstream media they often claim. For his study of American news magazine coverage of the war, James Landers read almost nine hundred articles published from 1965 to 1973 and concluded that articles detailing troop misconduct were rare, and even after My Lai only appeared “occasionally.”²⁶¹ Furthermore soldiers still faced considerable hurdles coming forward with accusations. They were often strongly discouraged from speaking publicly about allegations of atrocities, even after the My Lai story broke.²⁶² They also made themselves the target of investigations into misconduct. The related case of the massacre by B Company in My Hoi strongly undermines the argument that soldiers were somehow unshackled by the revelations of My Lai; the investigation eventually failed in part because some participants had died before they could be questioned, but also, to the frustration of General Peers, because participants were unwilling to talk about it.²⁶³ But even when soldiers were willing to talk, it did not necessarily mean there was a ready platform for them, or an open-minded audience. When the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* published Haerberle’s images it was hit with a deluge of mail from readers who were outraged, some of whom called the act anti-American.²⁶⁴

There is some evidence that suggests the uproar over My Lai in some ways stifled the publication of further stories about Vietnamese civilian deaths in the war. In 1972 *Newsweek*

²⁶¹ James Landers, *The Weekly War: Newsmagazines and Vietnam* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 9.

²⁶² While still serving soldiers were at risk legally as well as from retaliatory attacks from fellow soldiers and superiors. The Peers Report note this fact when addressing the suppression of information. RDAR Volume 1, 11-2, 11-8. Once out of service if they came forward with claims of atrocities, responsibility was sometimes turned back on them by investigators and military officials by questioning why no reports were filed to the proper authorities at the time of the alleged incidents. For example, see the account of Charles McDuff’s exchange with the Department of Defence in Nick Turse, *Kill Anything that Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam*, 1-2.

²⁶³ RDAR Volume 1, 7-2. Also see Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 309.

²⁶⁴ Nancy Zaroulis and Gerald Sullivan, *Who Spoke Up? American Protest Against the War in Vietnam 1963-1975* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1984), 350.

published a news item written by their Saigon bureau chief, Kevin Buckley, in which he exposed the results of a U.S. operation in the Mekong Delta region known as “Speedy Express.”²⁶⁵ The operation had caused a reported 10,899 deaths yet netted only 748 weapons with only 267 U.S. casualties; a result Buckley posits was from the deliberate targeting of civilians by U.S. forces.²⁶⁶ Buckley’s article is now well-known, and cited in some highly regarded surveys of the war.²⁶⁷ Less known though is the trouble he faced trying to get the story published, and the degree to which his findings were muted by editing.²⁶⁸ Years later Buckley recounted a conversation he had with a Newsweek editor at the time: “He told me that it would be a gratuitous attack on the [Nixon] administration at this point to do another story on civilian deaths after the press had given the army and Washington such a hard time over My Lai.”²⁶⁹ In a twist of irony, the volatility of the evidence that indicated that the atrocities in Son My were not exceptional was among the very reasons the My Lai Massacre remained exceptional.

Despite observing and reporting an increase in the number of atrocity stories – “enough to be deeply disturbing,” according to *Time* magazine – there was a persistent refusal to equate the stories to American policy in Vietnam. The same *Time* article later referred to My Lai and the rest of the atrocities for which Americans had been accused as “the unlawful actions of a group of soldiers running amuck.” It was not that American reporters were unwilling or unable to draw connections between individual acts and larger national policies. The author of the *Time* article points to an “unusually brutal enemy who uses terror deliberately” (as opposed to the

²⁶⁵ Kevin Buckley, “Pacification’s Deadly Price” *Newsweek* 19 June, 1972, 42-43.

²⁶⁶ Ibid. U.S. casualty figure from Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 142.

²⁶⁷ For example, see Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990*, 223.

²⁶⁸ Nick Turse, “The Vietnam Exposé that Wasn’t” *The Nation* 13 November, 2008.

²⁶⁹ Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-maker from the Crimea to Kosovo* (London: Quartet Books, 1982), 439. Also cited in Nick Turse, “The Vietnam Exposé that Wasn’t”

presumably accidental use of terror by America.)²⁷⁰ Daniel Hallin's media analysis in *The "Uncensored War"* demonstrates that in fact there was a consistent bias in the way American news outlets reported American atrocities as opposed to NFL or North Vietnamese atrocities. American atrocities were reported in what Hallin describes as a "very specific" and "objective" manner. There were no connections drawn between incidents and American policy. On the other hand communist atrocities were routinely cast as part of a "policy of terror."²⁷¹ In terms of the My Lai massacre, Hallin noted ABC's television reporting which stated "My Lai was for Americans an exceptional horror" yet "My Lais for the other side are a daily way of life."²⁷² This became one of the typical refrains of conservatives regarding the massacre.

In the immediate wake of the public My Lai revelations the Army, under the orders of the Department of Defence, began to assemble and investigate all the outstanding reports of atrocities and war crimes, other than those related to My Lai, into a special file. The work was conducted by a newly formed unit called the Vietnam War Crimes Working Group (VWCWG). The file took on the same name. According to Jared Schopper, the lead staff officer in charge of the file when it was active, the Nixon administration wanted atrocity stories out of the news. A key purpose in tracking the allegations after Son My was to undermine the news-worthiness of the stories. "The only way to get them off the front page" he told Deborah Nelson in an interview, "is to say they are founded and appropriate action was taken, or that they are unfounded and propaganda tools."²⁷³ Whichever the case, as long members of the media were not suspicious of the Army attempting to cover up stories, any accusations that did become public did not go far in the press. In 1994 approximately ten thousand pages of the VWCWG

²⁷⁰ "My Lai: An American Tragedy" *Time* 94-23, 5 December, 1969, 29-39.

²⁷¹ Daniel Hallin, *The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 156.

²⁷² ABC 28 May, 1970. As cited in Daniel Hallin, *The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam*, 180.

²⁷³ Deborah Nelson, *The War Behind Me: Vietnam Veterans Confront the Truth About War Crimes*, 174.

files were quietly declassified and opened to the public. The records certainly shed new light on accusations that the press and public were paying undue attention to atrocity stories. Given the size and nature of the file it is hard to conclude that the country was taking the allegations seriously enough. According to several historians who have reviewed the files completely, there are hundreds of substantiated allegations and hundreds more for which substantiating evidence could not be uncovered.²⁷⁴ Only some of these cases ever received any publicity, and none of course received anything close to the attention given to the massacre in Thuan Yen, let alone the rest of Son My village. These records, along with a willingness to ask hard questions and draw hard conclusions about the role of Americans in Vietnam will be necessary components in any project designed to reconfigure the story of the Son My massacres and its place in the larger war.

As it remains now, the way the My Lai massacre has been remembered and incorporated into histories of the Vietnam War demonstrates some particular conservative impulses. This has been, in part, the outcome of ideologically driven responses to the massacre, including the initial reaction to it and later historical accounts over the course of the rest of the 20th century. These responses include stressing individual culpability within the ranks of soldiers on the ground in Son My, and narrowing the scope of the massacre to specific and isolated events. One of the primary reasons for such responses has been a preference for defining the massacre as exceptional in order to sanitize the American war effort – a war that many conservatives supported. It is not particularly surprising that conservatives (among others) wished to contain,

²⁷⁴ The VWCWG files have been the subject or major source for a few recent books. The Tiger Force series of articles written by Michael D. Sallah and Mitch Weiss and published in the *Toledo Blade* from 20-27 October, 2003 was among the first American publications to use the source. Sallah and Weiss later wrote a monograph, *Tiger Force: A True Story of Men and War* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2006). Deborah Nelson provides a description of the file and a partial summary of the cases in an appendix in *The War Behind Me: Vietnam veterans Confront the Truth About U.S. War Crimes*, 3, 209-256. Possibly the first full length study based on these records (originally published in Germany in 2007) is Bernd Greiner, *War Without Fronts: the USA in Vietnam*. See pages 10-11 for a description and brief history of the records. Most recently see Nick Turse, *Kill Anything that Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam*. See pages 14-15 for a brief description of the file's contents.

minimize, and obscure the massacre, but what is somewhat more surprising is the way the fruits of these conservative impulses have disseminated into orthodox historiography and popular memory of the war despite the supposedly rather minimal influence conservatives have had overall on the history of the war.²⁷⁵ Often descriptions of the ‘My Lai massacre’ in many reputable histories of the war are not so much descriptions of what actually happened in Son My, but instead they are recitations of what is popularly thought to have happened. In this regard there is little difference between representations of My Lai in mainstream American historiography of the war and popular American memory. The marked similarities in the way the massacre is portrayed in media intended for mass consumption (such as television documentaries) and university survey texts is a demonstration of this point. So too does the repetition of basic errors regarding details of the Son My attack in histories of the war. Outside of the specialized literature on the subject of the ‘My Lai massacre,’ which is quite thorough, there are only rare instances when descriptions and analyses deviate from a standard (what I consider conservative) narrative. Additionally, there are elements within the sum of documented and mnemonic traces of the Son My massacres, and the way these elements have been used, that lend weight to an exceptional model of the massacre. These are not all entirely ideologically driven. For example, the popular interest in human elements of the story that has resulted in a great deal of emphasis placed on individual participants’ perspectives is not the result of any concerted effort to shape public understanding of the massacre. While fascinating and important

²⁷⁵ Robert J. McMahon has written that conservative revisionists have not changed “our” understanding of the war in any significant way. (I do not know if “our” refers to historians, or the nation as a whole.) “Vietnam War (1960-75): Changing Interpretations” *The Oxford Companion to American Military History* ed. John Whiteclay Chambers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Online: <http://www.oxfordreference.com.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/view/10.1093/acref/9780195071986.001.0001/acref-9780195071986-e-0967#acref-9780195071986-eSub-0121> Accessed 20 February, 2014. Mark Moyar writes that the conservative revisionist view is only slowly gaining ground outside of college faculties, but academia has mostly shunned it. Mark Moyar, “Vietnam: Historians at War” US Army Research, Paper 33, 2008 51.

in their own right, these personal accounts tend to overshadow or displace larger, more abstract and less human factors that are not immediately consumable in popular media. The photographic evidence also tends to emphasize an interpretation of the massacre as a unique and singular event in a passive manner. On the other hand, conservatives have conjoined the uniqueness of the evidence regarding My Lai with their argument about the oppositional nature of the media during the war to bolster their claim that the massacre must have been exceptional. Knowledge of the full extent of the raid on Son My village and the way American misdeeds in Vietnam were most often treated by the mainstream American media contradicts conservative arguments regarding the massacre. More recent analyses of the declassified VWCWG files serve to further undermine exceptionalist arguments.

CHAPTER 4

FORGING A USABLE PAST

Contrary to many authors, Kendrick Oliver has argued that the My Lai massacre is not forgotten, but it has never established the status of a stable memory with a clear meaning “most easily converted into a usable past.” According to Oliver, this is due to the way Americans, particularly political and cultural leaders, responded to the massacre and the trial as the events unfolded in the press and on the evening news. There was never a public consensus reached regarding the case and the real Vietnamese victims were lost in a debate about American blame and victimization.²⁷⁶ Indeed, the claim that My Lai is forgotten is hard to support: Calley is among the most famous (or infamous in his case) veterans of the war.²⁷⁷ As Oliver points out elsewhere, My Lai is discussed, or rather mentioned ever so briefly, on anniversaries, or when there are revelations of atrocity or war crime for which the news reel requires some sort of historical parallel.²⁷⁸ When authors rhyme off the supposedly pivotal events of the war that somehow defined a cohort or period, My Lai is often included. Therefore Oliver is right to correct those who lament a fading or lost memory of the My Lai massacre. There is also little doubt that the way the massacre was initially received has played a significant role in

²⁷⁶ Kendrick Oliver, *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory*, 8-9.

²⁷⁷ Calley is often listed among the more memorable figures of the war. During the Gulf War the *Washington Post* put Calley in the company of Colin Powell as the most famous veterans of Vietnam “War Without Apologies” *Washington Post* 19 October, 1992, B2. Closing out the war in 1975, *Newsweek* listed Calley along with Abbie Hoffman and Daniel Ellsberg as part of “a mixed bag of historical footnotes”: “The End of an Era,” *Newsweek* 5 May, 1975, 20. For the tenth anniversary of the war the *Wall Street Journal* included Calley in a short list of people “who had an impact, large or small, on the Vietnam era.” “Vietnam’s Legacy” *Wall Street Journal* 20 February, 1985, 1, 28.

²⁷⁸ Kendrick Oliver, “Coming to Terms with the Past” *History Today* 56-2, 2006. The most recent examples are in the revelations regarding Haditha, Abu Graib, and Robert Bales in Afghanistan. Indeed on these occasions some members of the media use the massacre to illustrate that ‘war is hell,’ and such things are bound to happen. For example, see Stephen L. Carter “My Lai Revisited,” *Newsweek* (19 March, 2012). Online: <http://www.newsweek.com/stephen-carter-my-lai-revisited-after-afghanistan-massacre-63725>; William F. Buckley Jr. “My Lai Again?” *National Review* (17 July, 2006), 50. Also see further examples later in this chapter. This is a rather odd and contradictory position for a conservative to take, since it tends to be a negation of agency.

determining the nature of its memory. It is not surprising that the focus of attention shifted to America and Americans and their role as supposed victims considering that American victimization is a theme that eventually engulfed much of the memory of the war.²⁷⁹ However, Oliver's assertion about the status of American memory of the massacre in terms of its ability to function as part of a "usable past" deserves further consideration. Whether My Lai has been put to 'use' is dependent upon what constitutes 'use' in the realm of historical memory. Certainly the massacre will never function as a free-standing critical component of national identity in an easily digestible form. It will never be refined down to an idea about America's past and present that can be symbolized in a medium such as a national anthem, or commemorative coin, but it does work in a less explicit supporting role for important national myths.²⁸⁰ As Oliver points out, the massacre lacks a constituency in America which might have a vested interest in linking My Lai to a specific political or cultural use.²⁸¹ But the massacre is often incorporated into narratives whose authors wish to extract some sort of 'lesson' from the war. In this regard the massacre does serve a use, even if it does so indirectly, or without the aid of an organizational mandate. I disagree with Oliver that the memory of the massacre is not stable or usable; on the contrary I think it has stabilized (as much as any historical 'event' can), at least within the mainstream of scholarship and public discourse. Its memory is put to use, both explicitly and implicitly when it is called upon. Unfortunately it is most often put to use in ways that depend upon a facile interpretation of the events, and a neglect or suppression of ethical inquiry that

²⁷⁹ For a brief review of literature that addresses the mnemonic preoccupation with America's suffering and attempts to recover from the war (in lieu of Vietnamese suffering and American responsibility) see Christian Appy, "The Muffling of Public Memory in Post-Vietnam America," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 45-23 (1999): B4, accessed February 4, 2013, EBSCOhost.

²⁸⁰ History serving mythic ends is how Warren I. Susman described the idea of a 'usable past' in "History and the American Intellectual: Uses of a Usable Past," *American Quarterly* 16-2, Part 2 Supplement (Summer, 1964), 247.

²⁸¹ Kendrick Oliver, *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory*, 234.

identifies with the true victims. In terms of a ‘usable past’ My Lai serves several purposes, just not any which are derived from a responsibly altruistic and ethical accounting of the massacres.

This chapter will examine some of the most prevalent ways the memory of My Lai functions as a *usable past*. Interestingly, the My Lai Massacre has been incorporated into a number of ‘lessons of the past’ that tend to be derived from conservative narratives of the war. Possibly this is a manifestation of traits inherent to American conservatism. Patrick Allitt recently described conservatism as “an *attitude* to social and political change that looks for support to the ideas, beliefs, and habits of the past and puts more faith in the lessons of history than the abstractions of political philosophy.”²⁸² This may help explain how the massacre could be incorporated into narratives from which lessons could be drawn, or that illustrate American virtue, particularly with a conservative bent. It is somewhat counterintuitive that an American atrocity such as the My Lai Massacre might function in such a way. A cursory glance across a range of popular representations of the Vietnam War and the My Lai Massacre appears to confirm the idea that the massacre undermined the war by scuttling public opinion, it enlivened the antiwar movement by confirming its worst suspicions, and it generally came to symbolize American imperialism in Southeast Asia. Simply put, at a glance it appears to be remembered as something awful perpetrated by Americans during an equally awful and unpopular war. Such an assessment seems incompatible with, or at least problematic for, conservative narratives of the war. Yet closer inspection reveals that these images and ideas are in fact either partially dependent upon particular conservative revisions of the war’s history, or elicit even stronger, more readily accepted counter images. Rarely does the My Lai Massacre get incorporated into a story about the nature of American fighting in Vietnam except as a sort of ‘exception to the rule’

²⁸² Patrick Allitt, *The Conservatives: Ideas and Personalities Throughout American History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 2.

or more frequently as evidence of the brutality and ruthlessness of the region and its people.²⁸³ Attempts to extract any larger truths about the war from the massacre are quickly and thoroughly attacked as misinformed attempts to libel the military and veterans, the remnants of radical propaganda from the 1960s. It is the rare history that does not treat the atrocities in Son My as something that ‘went wrong.’²⁸⁴ Sometimes the massacre is used as an indicator of American exceptionalism: ‘only America would pursue justice at its own expense during a time of war.’ The massacre is also regularly part of the story of Americans’ loss of morale, both at home and in Vietnam, which aided in its own self-defeat. In this case it is used to support a larger revisionist narrative of the Vietnam War from which various lessons are prescribed. Memory of the massacre also offers an occasion to discuss Vietnamese terror and atrocities, both as an explanation for the massacre, and as a sort of moral equalizer. In this regard the massacre functions as part of an understanding of atrocities as an inevitable outcome of counter-insurgency warfare. This has proved useful when American soldiers have fallen afoul of the laws of war in missions since the 1970s. Not only does it serve as an historical example of how soldiers can make ‘mistakes,’ but it is often held up as the reason the military is supposedly so efficient at dealing with such indiscretions. The massacre also figures into narratives spawned out of the 1980s about America’s debasement of its veterans. Since the 1990s there have been efforts to emphasize Hugh Thompson’s role in the massacre and draw lessons of American chivalry and heroism. Thus, there are many ways in which a relatively stable memory of the My Lai Massacre has been utilized within revisionist narratives, most of which relate to America’s

²⁸³ Mackubin Thomas Owens called My Lai this precisely. While emphasizing the restraint demonstrated by the Army in Vietnam he writes that “My Lai is, of course, the exception that seems to prove the rule.” “A Sacred Space” *National Review* 17 October, 2011, 54.

²⁸⁴ A couple of recent exceptions to this are Bernd Greiner, *War Without Fronts: the USA in Vietnam*. Nick Turse, *Kill Anything that Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam*.

response to the massacre at home. Many of them are conservative in origin and are part of a broader national mythology.

All this raises important questions about the nature of American memory of the war, but also, on a more theoretical level, about the problematic nature of narrative in history. On narrativity Paul Ricoeur wrote that “A story is *made out of* events to the extent that plot *makes* events *into* a story.” In this regard the My Lai Massacre “receives its definition from its contribution to the development of a plot” – in this case, the development of America’s various Vietnam War plots.²⁸⁵ One of the problems with the most common representations of the My Lai Massacre is the way in which the massacre is worked into the most dominant American Vietnam War narratives. The way the massacre is used to develop a plot (or support an argument) about tragedy – whether it is a tragedy of mistakes, loss of innocence, or self-defeat – tends to minimize, distort, or overlook the true nature of what happened in Son My. In many cases the massacre is presented as a tragedy, but a tragedy for Americans – as is often the case with the whole Vietnam War. As news of the massacre was breaking in the national press *Time* magazine declared the massacre an “American tragedy” that proved even American soldiers were subject to the “cruelty and inhumanity” of war.²⁸⁶ More than one early survey indicated that the public’s perception of the massacre was largely shaped by their perception of the war.²⁸⁷ This early trend has survived into some of the historiography of the war. Of interest here is the relationship between narratives of the massacre and various narratives of the rest of the war in which the massacre is situated. The various “emplotment choices” an historian or author makes

²⁸⁵ Paul Ricoeur, “Narrative Time” *Critical Inquiry* 7-1, 1980, 171.

²⁸⁶ “My Lai: An American Tragedy,” *Time* 5 December, 1969, 19. William George Eckhardt, chief prosecutor in the My Lai cases, also wrote an essay titled, “My Lai: An American Tragedy,” *UMKC Law Review* 68 (1999-2000): 671-703.

²⁸⁷ “Assessing Songmy [sic]: Doves Recoil by Hawks Tend to See ‘Massacre’ as Just a Part of War” *Wall Street Journal* 1 December, 1969, 1. “A Time-Louis Harris Poll: The War: New Support For Nixon,” *Time* 12 Jan, 1970.

for the massacre are revealing of the particular *use* for which the massacre is meant to serve (as they also are of the author who makes them).²⁸⁸

Losing Wars

My Lai is often cited as a significant factor in the crumbling of national innocence in America (or at least in the idea of it). *Life*'s 45th anniversary article on My Lai stated that the massacre "marked the end of a certain willful American innocence."²⁸⁹ The American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said "there was a lot of illusion in our national history" but the news of the massacre "shattered" Americans' self-image as a "redeemer nation."²⁹⁰ He was right about the sharp conflict between the image of American soldiers wantonly killing innocents and the country's self-image, but had he lived a few more years to reflect, he may very well have changed his mind about America shattering its illusory national history. In retrospect My Lai is a better illustration of the resilience of the illusion. There is no shortage of voices in the media who expressed ideas similar to Niebuhr's contemporaneously or since, but it has mostly been rhetorical. On the contrary, the initial period of shock subsided, and in time explanations, rationalizations, and recriminations took over. However, for various reasons, overstating the impact of the massacre on the public's perception of the military and the war, as well as the nation as a whole is useful.

Overemphasizing the effects of the public's revelation of the massacre is intended to demonstrate the moral conscience of the nation, or the efficacy of the antiwar movement – for

²⁸⁸ Alun Munslow, *The Routledge Companion to Historical Studies* 2nd Edition (New York: Routledge, 2006), 181.

²⁸⁹ Ben Cosgrove, "American Atrocity: Remembering My Lai" *Life* online: <http://life.time.com/history/my-lai-remembering-an-american-atrocity-in-vietnam-march-1968/#end>. Accessed 12 August, 2013.

²⁹⁰ Reinhold Niebuhr quoted in Robert McFadden, "Calley Verdict Brings Home the Anguish of War to Public" *New York Times* 4 April, 1971, 56.

good or bad.²⁹¹ William George Eckhardt wrote that “[i]t may well have been the turning point in an unpopular war.”²⁹² Aubrey Daniel, the lead prosecutor in the Calley court-martial, said in an interview with CNN “the My Lai massacre really brought into focus for the country the limits, if you will, on our consciousness. It made us take a very, very long, hard look at the war and the conduct of the war and what it meant for Americans.”²⁹³ On the seventeenth anniversary of the massacre the *Washington Post* wrote that My Lai was “a benchmark in the U.S. public’s shifting perceptions of the Vietnam War.” More recently on the forty-fifth anniversary it stated that “My Lai came to mark the beginning of the end for the U.S. military in Vietnam.”²⁹⁴ The *L.A. Times* recently wrote that the massacre “ended up shaping the outcome of that war.”²⁹⁵ These sources and countless others mark My Lai as a turning point in support for the war – as though it caused an awakening of conscience, or its news fueled a moral indignation that was stronger than the political will to continue the war. There is no denying that the news came as a shock for many. Some people initially denied it, while some others rationalized immediately, but for the most part the country was shaken – for a brief period. However, the massacre was quickly subsumed into the cacophony of Vietnam related chatter – not so much shaping the soundscape as much as becoming a part of the larger competing interpretations of the war.

²⁹¹ Marilyn B. Young has made a similar point regarding the idea that the antiwar movement effectively ended American involvement in Vietnam. She claims such a narrative suits both the left and the right: “The left because it testifies to its own efficacy....The right because it means that U.S. arms remain invincible; only betrayal can explain American defeat.” Marilyn B. Young, “Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh, Ho Chi Minh is Gonna Win!” in *Why the North Won the Vietnam War* ed. Marc Jason Gilbert (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 219.

²⁹² William George Eckhardt, “My Lai: An American Tragedy” 673.

²⁹³ Aubrey Daniel interview on CNN aired 6 March, 1998. Transcript available online: <http://www.174ahc.org/mylai-01.htm>. Accessed 12 February, 2014.

²⁹⁴ William Branigm, *Washington Post* “Village of My Lai Now a Memorial But Hue Massacre is Unmarked” 21 April, 1985, A27. Simon Speakman Cordall, “45 years after My Lai, massacre’s survivors mourn a lost generation” *Washington Post*, 15 March, 2013.

²⁹⁵ Patt Morrison, “Two Massacres: Kandahar and My Lai” *Los Angeles Times*, 14 March, 2012. Online: <http://opinion.latimes.com/opinionla/2012/03/two-massacres-kandahar-and-my-lai.html>. Accessed 19 September, 2013.

Where does this idea that the massacre had a profound effect on the war come from? This myth persists despite there being little evidence to support it. Part of the confusion might stem from the fact that the story broke during a period of declining support anyway. But contemporary poll results make the connection between declining support and the massacre hard to sustain. A *Time*-Louis Harris poll conducted at the height of the news story indicated that 65% rejected the idea that the massacre was a sign that American involvement in Vietnam was *morally* wrong.²⁹⁶ Analyses of public support for the war in general do not register a change that corresponds with the public revelations of the massacre either. When assembled into chronological order, the results of a well-known Gallup Poll survey question (“In view of developments since we entered the fighting in Vietnam, do you think the U.S. made a mistake sending troops to fight in Vietnam?”) show no discernable drop in support after the massacre story broke – at least not one that could be attributed to the massacre. In fact, according to the results, during the months following the initial news of the massacre there was a brief increase in the percentage of Americans who did not think the war was a “mistake.”²⁹⁷ There is no doubt that the massacre occurred during a longer trend of declining support for the war (stretching back to 1965), but there is little evidence to suggest this had anything to do with My Lai.

In all likelihood the massacre’s apparent limited influence on popular opinion of the war was due to the fact that it did not have a bearing on the largest source of discontent in the first place. The results of a 1971 survey conducted in the Detroit area indicate that the *reasons* for opposition to the war were divided between moral and pragmatic concerns. The largest source of

²⁹⁶ “A Time-Louis Harris Poll: The War: New Support For Nixon” *Time* 12 January, 1970.

²⁹⁷ William Lunch and Peter W. Sperlich, “American Public Opinion and the War in Vietnam,” *The Western Political Quarterly* 32-1 (March 1979), 25. Christopher L. Corley offers a similar assessment of the ‘mistake question’ and its implications regarding the impact of My Lai on support for the war. Christopher L. Corley, “Acts of Atrocity: Effects on Public Opinion Support During War or Conflict” (Master’s Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2007), 33-34.

opposition was rooted in primarily pragmatic concerns: unclear objectives, allocation of military resources relative to the perception of progress, loss of *American* lives, and more generally the likelihood of winning the war. The minority of the population that was opposed to the war for moral reasons (mostly current college students) based their opposition on the asymmetrical nature of the warfare and the predictable toll the war was having on the lives of the Vietnamese.²⁹⁸ The Detroit-Area survey provides a clue to the seeming paradox between the Gallup poll results of January 1970 that indicated only 33% of the population did not think the war was a mistake, and the Time-Louis Harris poll in which 65% of the respondents rejected the idea that the war was immoral, even in light of the massacre. Conflating moral opposition to the war with the popular belief that the war was a mistake distorts the general nature of popular opposition. Common accounts of the My Lai Massacre that emphasize its influence on the American public's opposition to the war (and therefore on the outcome) places more emphasis on moral opposition to the war than is rightly deserved. There is no doubt that a portion of the population was outraged by the asymmetry in the apparent value of life the massacre demonstrated, but this was not the primary focus of the majority of Americans. Author and Vietnam veteran Karl Marlantes's comments in a recent television series, "The Sixties" highlight America's acceptance of this asymmetry. Responding to the U.S. Defense Department's optimistic claim that American forces could kill 300 Vietnamese for every one American casualty, he said "Do the American people care about the 300? No! They care about the one." It appears the passage of time has not changed the focus of American attention: the My Lai

²⁹⁸ Howard Schuman, "Two Sources of Antiwar Sentiment in America" *American Journal of Sociology* 78-3 (1972), 519, 524.

massacre is not mentioned once in the one hour special Vietnam episode, yet the entire hour is punctuated with American suffering.²⁹⁹

Exaggerating the impact of news of the massacre is also intended to illustrate the inclination of Americans to a strict moral code in warfare as opposed to their enemies. Simultaneously it provides support for arguments about how such inclinations can be taken advantage of by those interested in discrediting the war for political purposes. Conservatives willingly embrace an argument that over-emphasizes the influence of the massacre on the outcome of the war because it is compatible with their arguments about an oppositional media and its influence on popular opinion. Major Jeffrey Addicott and Major William Hudson Jr. of the Judge Advocate General's Corps of the U.S. Army make the connection between these ideas clearer in their analysis of My Lai when they write that "My Lai had a devastating impact on the outcome of the Vietnam War....this one atrocity arguably did as much to harm the survival of an independent South Vietnam as any other single event during the Indo-China War. [It] not only solidified the antiwar movement..., but also cast a pall of confusion and shame over the nation at large. This aura contributed significantly to the eventual abandonment of South Vietnam." The 'harm' according to Addicott and Hudson Jr. was caused by a "vocal minority of war protesters [who] incorporated the United States soldier into their opposition to the war."³⁰⁰ There are echoes of Nixon's "silent majority" speech coming through in their argument about the massacre. They are suggesting that the 'vocal minority' used the massacre to paint the war with broad brushstrokes and effectively turned the population against the war. Although Addicott and Hudson Jr. are more explicit in drawing a connection between their notion of the public reaction

²⁹⁹ Karl Marlantes quoted in "The War in Vietnam," *The Sixties*, first broadcast 19 June, 2014 by CNN, Produced by Tom Hanks, Gary Goetzman, Mark Herzog.

³⁰⁰ Major Jeffrey Addicott and Major William Hudson Jr. "The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Of My Lai: A Time To Inculcate The Lessons" *Military Law Review* 139 (1993), 161.

to the massacre and their broader conservative interpretation of the war, the same theme is evident elsewhere. The conservative journal *Human Events* links the American media coverage of My Lai to America's failure in the war. The author of a 1978 article titled "Indicting the Media on Vietnam..." begins his brief editorial by suggesting a debate was raging about "Who lost Indochina to the Communists and who's to blame for the horrendous toll of suffering in the region." At the centre of the page is a gruesome image of a Vietnamese casualty from what is described as a communist terror attack, and an explanation suggesting American journalists willfully ignored communist atrocities and over-emphasized the My Lai massacre. The author's point as stated in his conclusion: "until the media come to grips with their own responsibility in helping cause the holocaust in Indochina, the lessons of the Vietnam War will remain unlearned."³⁰¹ More recently the *American Spectator*, a conservative journal, provided a particularly rosy interpretation of the Vietnam War from which lessons for the Iraq war were drawn. According to the author the Vietnam War was all but won by 1973 – "You could almost call it a victory." But "purely domestic" issues including the revelations of My Lai emboldened critics' voices and sabotaged any hope of a positive conclusion.³⁰² This 'snatching defeat from the jaws of victory' thesis places My Lai among the various means with which 'antiwar Democrats' undermined the supposedly successfully conducted war.

Only in America

An article in the *Wall Street Journal* published shortly after Calley's trial ended hinted at the potential for something good to come of the massacre when it concluded that Calley's

³⁰¹ M. Stanton Evans, "Indicting the Media on Vietnam..." *Human Events* 22 December, 1979, 10.

³⁰² William Tucker, "The Real Lesson of Vietnam" *The American Spectator*, 4 October, 2007. Online: <http://tas.spectator.org/articles/44710/real-lesson-vietnam>. Accessed 20 June, 2014.

conviction “might return some measure of value if it causes the government to be more discriminating in how it uses its power.”³⁰³ This is a reasonable expression of cautious optimism. Over time, though, the natural desire to retrieve something of ‘value’ from the massacre and its aftermath has, in some quarters, overshadowed any discussion of a proper accounting and reconciliation for the atrocities in Son My. Journalists and historians sometimes use the American response (both real and imagined) to the news as an indicator of American virtue and exceptionalism - a reminder of how a noble nation reacts to its own misdeeds. Strangely it is sometimes an occasion to trumpet the altruistic nature of the American military. Emphasis is placed on America’s reaction: the investigation, the moral outrage at home, the official admission by the government, the punishment of those who were responsible, the changes to army training, (however compromised these points may be is glossed over). Each factor in the American response stands as a testament to the inherent goodness of the nation (or the unflinching ability for it to redeem itself) in contrast to the treatment of atrocities by other nations and militaries. Phyllis Schlafly, an influential American conservative activist and author, captured the essence of the common denominator of most reflections on the massacre when she said, “While we cannot judge all the facts about MyLai, it must be stressed that Lieutenant Calley was brought to trial for doing something the United States does not condone as part of our policy in Southeast Asia.”³⁰⁴ Beside the fact that this statement singles out Calley as the perpetrator, the solitary certainty of My Lai from this view is that the United States does not stand for such behaviour and acts out against it.

³⁰³ “War and Guilt,” *Wall Street Journal* March 31, 1971, 14.

³⁰⁴ Phyllis Schlafly quoted in Donald T. Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade*, 204.

In 1980 Uwe Siemon-Netto, a Vietnam wartime journalist speaking at a conference hosted by the conservative media group Accuracy in Media (AIM), told his audience “the My Lai massacre was uncovered with the assistance, unprecedented in previous wars, of the U.S. military. But...was portrayed as a triumph of investigative journalism.”³⁰⁵ He claimed the U.S. military deserves praise for uncovering the massacre, while the press is responsible for losing the war by, among many other things, exaggerating and distorting the facts on My Lai. This interpretation of My Lai is rooted in early conservative reactions to the massacre and has become one of the ways in which memory of the massacre is used to support established American ideals – albeit as a distinctly minority enterprise. Addicott and Hudson Jr., writing on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the massacre, used the massacre as a means to explain what they deemed to be America’s “commendable record in adhering to the law of war” since Vietnam. For Addicott and Hudson Jr. the good record is due to lessons learned from My Lai and this is the reason American memory of the massacre is so important.³⁰⁶ They are quite explicit about the *usefulness* of the memory of My Lai from which lessons could be drawn. Stephen E. Ambrose, expressed a similar idea at 1994 Tulane University conference on My Lai. He said “One of the things that stands out about My Lai to me and makes it not only possible to live with it but to be once again proud of...the United States Army, was that the army investigated this itself and made that investigation public, and did its best to punish the perpetrators of this outrage. I defy you to name any other army in the world that would do that.”³⁰⁷ Burkett echoes the same sentiment in *Stolen Valor*: “What army in the history of the world, in the middle of a war, has publicly examined the actions of one of its officers, generating massive propaganda material for

³⁰⁵ Richard A. Vigilante, “AIM and the New Canons of Journalism,” *Human Events* 23 February, 1980, 12.

³⁰⁶ Major Jeffrey Addicott and Major William Hudson Jr. “The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Of My Lai: A Time To Inculcate The Lessons” 154.

³⁰⁷ Stephen E. Ambrose in *Facing My Lai: Moving Beyond the Massacre* ed. David L. Anderson, 118.

its enemies?”³⁰⁸ The accuracy of such a claim aside, a half-hearted admission of fault seems a rather low bar to set for an institution these authors hold in such high regard. Neither Ambrose nor Burkett consider that the army only pursued its investigation when it absolutely had to. Neither of them address the total lack of will on the part of the Army and the government to pursue any of the men who were no longer in service. They also assume the army initiated the investigation for noble purposes: there is no reason to believe this is the case. Certainly the secret investigations the military conducted into hundreds of other wartime atrocities after My Lai were not done so entirely altruistically, but rather were an attempt to keep abreast of crimes that might have led to potential scandals, and possibly provide some means for discrediting whistleblowers.³⁰⁹

Eckhardt sees the massacre from a similar vantage point. He opens his 2000 essay on the massacre with a quotation from an International conference on military law in 1991: “Only the United States of America would not cover it up, would prosecute it at the cost of losing a war, and would use it so forcefully to prevent future incidents.”³¹⁰ He too offers praise for the military and the government’s perusal of justice in the case as opposed to the media for uncovering the massacre. This was, in his view, simply a case in which the government “did its duty” and the press is undeserving of any credit.³¹¹ For Eckhardt the memory of the massacre is all about the lessons it offers, and in his estimate the lessons have been learned; he believes it effectively prevented subsequent occurrences of “battlefield misconduct” and increased military

³⁰⁸ B.G. Burkett and Glenna Whitley, *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation Was Robbed of its Heroes and its History*, 118.

³⁰⁹ Bernd Greiner, *War Without Fronts: the USA in Vietnam*, 10. Deborah Nelson, *The War Behind Me: Vietnam Veterans Confront the Truth About War Crimes*, 171, 174.

³¹⁰ Eckhardt cites this as the “Essence of introductory remarks given by Belgium Host prior to presentation entitled ‘Difficulties in Prosecuting Battlefield Offenses: My Lai Example, during a Congress of the International Society for Military Law and The Law of War in Brussels, Belgium on May 31, 1991.’” In William George Eckhardt, “My Lai: An American Tragedy” 671.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 676.

professionalism in America and the rest of the world. He also insists that “misconduct on the battlefield loses wars.”³¹² The “misconduct” in My Lai “caused a shift in public opinion towards opposition to involvement in Vietnam and in the Vietnam War,” and was therefore an important factor in America’s defeat. Here again the lessons taken from the massacre are compatible with conservative narratives of the war. Eckhardt closes his essay with a reflection on the dissolution of the Soviet Union: it is in this context of former communist countries joining the democratic free market economy of the West that he believes America could offer international leadership on matters pertaining to the “professional use of force and to human rights” due to the lessons learned from My Lai.³¹³ The massacre then is part of a ‘rite of passage’ that has elevated the United States to a position of global authority on matters of morality and the rule of law in war. Therefore there is a current of thought regarding the massacre in which the massacre and its aftermath in the U.S. is a mark of military and judicial integrity. This is a rather bizarre and drastic revision of history considering what an abject failure of justice many of those involved considered it at the time.³¹⁴ Yet signs of this reinterpretation of the massacre appear on occasions when the massacre is recalled.

There is no denying that a lack of accountability for the massacre and the lack of political and legal will to properly pursue all of the participants is a prevalent theme running through the

³¹² William George Eckhardt, “My Lai: An American Tragedy” 694.

³¹³ Ibid., 702-703.

³¹⁴ Most notably, Captain Aubrey Danial, prosecutor in Calley’s trial, wrote a letter to President Nixon admonishing him for what he thought was executive interference in the judicial fairness of the trial. Aubrey Danial letter to President Nixon, 3 April, 1971. Online: http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/mylai/daniels_ltr.html. Accessed 3 March, 2013. William Peers also expressed great disappointment in the lack of will exhibited by the Army and the government to prosecute those implicated by his inquiry. “These sentences were so mild, that in a way it simply says that we don’t like this kind of activity but in a way condone it....Now that we have this precedent...what the hell are we going to do with the people who commit war crimes or related actions?” William Peers speaking at US Army War College Senior Leader Oral History program, 14 April, 1977, as cited in Lawrence P. Rockwood, “The Lesson Avoided: The Official Legacy of the My Lai Massacre” in *The Moral Dimension of Asymmetrical Warfare Counter-terrorism, Democratic Values and Military Ethics*, 191.

popular narrative of the massacre. However, ‘lessons from the past’ and ‘healing’ are dominant themes within American memory of the Vietnam War. Although a key component of the My Lai story in America is the supposed *miscarriage of justice* that was the sole conviction of Calley and his commutation, amended to this are lessons or redemptive actions. Emphasis is often placed on the idea that something was gained. This is the theme brought about in response to attempts to draw parallels between more recent military atrocities and My Lai. When news of a mass killing by an American soldier in Afghanistan hit the American media recently some news outlets drew comparisons to My Lai. But according to *Newsweek* the critical difference lies in the lessons America had learned from the My Lai massacre. “America has changed” was the claim. The country could no longer ignore atrocities committed in its name, “My Lai mercifully put an end to that habit.”³¹⁵ Accordingly, concerned citizens could rest assured that the military would pursue justice in cases of misconduct due to the lessons learned in Vietnam. It does not seem to matter that My Lai (let alone the larger reality of atrocities in Son My) was by any reasonable measure a total travesty of justice, nor is there any indication of *how* the country learned a lesson since then. Most of the country was content with Calley’s commutation, and there was anything but consensus regarding the allocation of responsibility beyond his role. Yet citing the My Lai massacre as a source of national wisdom in the realm of military justice is not uncommon.

Heroes and Victims

President Clinton’s 1995 speech recognizing the normalization of relations with Vietnam marked a desire to salvage something from the war. “Whatever we may think about the political

³¹⁵ Stephen L. Carter, “My Lai Revisited” *Newsweek* 158-14 (2 April, 2012), 19.

decisions of the Vietnam era,” he said, “the brave Americans who fought and died there had noble motives... Whatever divided us before let us consign to the past.”³¹⁶ This theme is evident in the resurgence of attention accorded to Hugh Thompson, the helicopter pilot who intervened in the massacre in Thuan Yen. Thompson’s resurgence in narratives of the massacre marks a desire to rescue heroes from this ordeal. Seymour Hersh and especially Ron Ridenhour certainly stand out as obvious choices for adulation. However their roles, particularly Hersh’s, are problematic for conservative narratives because of their connection to the media, and conservatives’ general refusal to acknowledge the role of the media (except as a negative influence on public perception) in uncovering the massacre in the first place. Thompson on the other hand was merely a soldier ‘doing his duty’ and therefore he serves as a much less problematic hero figure for conservative narratives of the massacre, and he is therefore the centrepiece of attempts to make use of the memory of My Lai. Indeed, the central lesson of My Lai according to Eckhardt is “ACT LIKE HUGH THOMPSON.”(*caps in original*)³¹⁷ This was not always the case. Initially, when details of the massacres were still uncertain, some conservatives attacked Thompson claiming he was the only person that might be guilty of a crime. L. Mendel Rivers, the House Armed Services Committee Chairman and strong supporter of the war, was most vocal in this regard. As the Calley trial unfolded, and a clearer picture of the events emerged, those accusations subsided. Sometimes Thompson’s role in the massacre is said to be overlooked, although it seems his role is central to the way My Lai is taught to younger Americans.³¹⁸ Conservatives especially tout this idea that Thompson’s role has been

³¹⁶ William J. Clinton, “Remarks Announcing the Normalization of Diplomatic Relations with Vietnam” 11, July, 1995. Online: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=51605>. Accessed 13 September, 2014.

³¹⁷ William George Eckhardt, “My Lai: An American Tragedy” 702.

³¹⁸ For example, The didactic teaching aid “Echoes from the Wall” retells the My Lai narrative from Thompson’s perspective, placing him in the lead role. Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, *Vietnam: Echoes from the Wall – Teachers’ Guide* (Washington D.C.: Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, 1999), 38.

lost amidst a chorus of liberal self-loathing. This is often expressed as an elaboration on the idea that Vietnam veterans have been slandered by the media and the antiwar movement.

“Thompson’s little known story” wrote Reed Irvine of *Accuracy in Media* “deserves more attention than it has received.”³¹⁹ He was frustrated by the lack of attention accorded to Thompson’s actions despite the media paying so much attention to the massacre. For Irvine this was yet another case of a liberal media bias skewing America’s memory of the war. Burkett writes that Thompson is “often left out of the My Lai discussion.”³²⁰ Of course this is one of the central points of *Stolen Valor*: that the Vietnam generation was “Robbed of its Heroes and its History.” It is no accident that the first and only official public acknowledgement of some of the events from the massacre was through the guise of honouring the ‘forgotten heroes’ of the ‘tragedy’ on the thirtieth anniversary. Putting the spotlight on Thompson and highlighting the injustice done to him by the Army, enabled the military to appear magnanimous by acknowledging their mistreatment of him and his crew while also appearing to embrace the anniversary of the massacre. The storyline played upon the theme of American veterans as victims, and it was appealing because it did so by drawing attention to heroic acts of which Americans could be proud. The renewed interest in Thompson’s story was reminiscent of President Clinton’s 1995 call to remember the ‘brave American who fought’ and forget the divisive aspects of the conflict. But this was hardly a unique way of remembering the war. It was, however, an effective use of the memory of the massacre and it was in keeping with the mistreated and neglected veteran trope.

³¹⁹ Reed Irvine, “Notes from the Editors’ Cuff” *AIM Report*, March, 1998.

³²⁰ B.G. Burkett and Glenna Whitley, *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation Was Robbed of its Heroes and its History*, 118.

In some ways memory of the massacre has functioned to keep alive the myth of the ‘spat upon’ or otherwise mistreated and misunderstood veteran.³²¹ In the early 1980s conservatives began touting a national memory of veterans’ service in the war instead of a memory of the war itself. Recalling My Lai or other atrocities committed by Americans increasingly had to be couched in careful qualifiers. More often than not, during occasions when the war was remembered nationally, such recollections were perceived as distasteful, even anti-American.³²² Jerry Lembcke suggests that a fading national memory of My Lai is a sign of this shift in focus from the war to the warrior. But the massacre need not be forgotten in order to facilitate a memory of the war that emphasizes the nobility of military service, heroism, and the sacrifices made by veterans. The military’s high profile medal ceremony for Thompson and his helicopter crew on the thirtieth anniversary of the massacre is possibly the most obvious evidence of this. There are other ways in which memory of the massacre perpetuates the idea that Vietnam veterans have been maligned. The very crux of the historical debate about My Lai as an aberrational or typical event of the Vietnam War is often interpreted (often incorrectly and possibly disingenuously in some cases) to be a debate about veterans’ service in the war. This might partially explain why many conservative historical accounts of My Lai have such overt and strongly worded condemnations of the acts and the soldiers who committed them. Obviously there are good reasons beyond ideologically motivated ones for condemnation, but often these condemnations are accompanied by statements that suggest the acts of C Company (or often simply Calley) and the media storm that followed had a devastating effect on the

³²¹ For a thorough examination of the ‘spat upon’ veteran myth see Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam*. Gary Kulik also dedicates a chapter to exposing the dubious origins of this common story in *“War Stories”: False Atrocity Tales, Swift boaters, and Winter soldiers – what Really Happened in Vietnam* (Dulles: Potomac Books, 2009), 78-95.

³²² Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam*, 122.

reputation of veterans. Burkett insists, “I don’t know any Vietnam veteran who condoned or excused what Calley and his platoon did. They sullied the reputation of every single one of us. Calley should have been tried for murder, found guilty, and executed.”³²³ Harry Summers suggested that “what they ought to have done with Calley and Medina was to have hung them, then drawn and quartered them, and put their remains at the gates of Fort Benning.”³²⁴ Both Burkett and Summers, veterans themselves (Summers died in 1999), see the massacre as the isolated actions of a few crazed soldiers and bad lower level commanders who, in their moment of weakness, gave the media and the antiwar movement exactly what they wanted and as a result destroyed the reputation of the entire military. Addicott and Hudson agree: the massacre “solidified the antiwar movement...For many of these people, the enemy was now the American fighting man.”³²⁵ Or, put another way, there was apparently “a widespread tendency to blame the warrior for the war” after the massacre was revealed.³²⁶

The idea that My Lai tarnished an otherwise nobly fought war has currency in conservative memories of the war. Podhoretz argues that the focus on My Lai and the whole issue of atrocities was merely an attempt to discredit the war effort.³²⁷ For many conservative revisionists the massacre is an important component in their story about losing the war at home. Since the 1980s when conservatives began to blur the line between critical appraisals of the war and military service, the nature of the debate about the massacre made it particularly susceptible to such ideological reinterpretations. My Lai often works as a self-explanatory premise in the

³²³ B.G. Burkett and Glenna Whitley, *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation Was Robbed of its Heroes and its History*, 117.

³²⁴ Harry Summers in *Facing My Lai: Moving Beyond the Massacre* ed. David L. Anderson, 126.

³²⁵ Major Jeffrey Addicott and Major William Hudson Jr. “The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Of My Lai: A Time To Inculcate The Lessons” 161.

³²⁶ Yvonne Honeycutt Baldwin and John Ernst, “In the Valley: The Combat Infantryman and the Vietnam War” in *The War that Never Ends: New Perspectives on the Vietnam War* eds. David L. Anderson and John Ernst (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 318-319.

³²⁷ Norman Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam* 189.

narrative of the Vietnam veteran who was shunned by the public upon return home. In a *Newsweek* article examining South Korean memory of the ROK atrocities in the Vietnam War the author explains “Korea's years in Vietnam have long been hailed as a glorious effort to combat communism. Unlike the United States, which tried Lt. William Calley for the slaughter of 504 civilians at My Lai in 1968, Korea has never publicly aired the conduct of its soldiers in Vietnam. Seoul's troops returned home as heroes.”³²⁸ Not only does this put America on the moral high-ground for supposedly pursuing justice in atrocity cases compared with its allies (not to mention its enemies), but it also plays to a revisionist memory of the war by linking My Lai to the idea that, in contrast to South Korean veterans, Americans were not welcomed home as heroes. The underlying idea in the story is that America owned up to its *crime* in Vietnam and as a result American veterans have paid a price.

There is little truth to claim that the antiwar movement or the broader public ‘blamed the warrior for the war.’ Very few people publicly voiced contempt for American soldiers or placed the burden of responsibility for atrocities on the shoulders of veterans. Additionally only a small minority of veterans felt as though they were being blamed by the antiwar movement for the war. A national Louis Harris Poll conducted for the Veterans’ Administration in 1971 revealed that seventy-five percent of veterans disagreed with the suggestion that “people at home who oppose the Vietnam war often blame veterans for our involvement there.” Of those respondents, about two thirds disagreed strongly.³²⁹ By the time the public became aware of the massacre, veterans

³²⁸ George Wehrfritz, Ron Moreau and B.J. Lee, “South Korea’s Vietnam” *Newsweek* 10 April, 2000, 36. This article sidesteps the related problem that South Korean troops were funded by the U.S., and that America bears a degree of responsibility for ROK atrocities as well. Nicholas Turse pursues this argument in both his book (p.127), and dissertation (p.151) *Kill Anything That Moves*. For a more thorough and original assessment of the relationship between the U.S. and ROK troops and ROK atrocities see Frank Baldwin, Diane Jones, and Michael Jones, *America’s Rented Troops: South Koreans in Vietnam* (Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, 1975).

³²⁹ Congress of the United States, Senate Committee on Veteran’s Affairs, “A Study of the Problems Facing Vietnam Era Veterans on their Readjustment to Civilians Life” 31 January, 1972, 13. Online: <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED074268>. Accessed 9 June, 2014.

were a much more visible element of the antiwar movement. In fact, by 1970 the veterans (mostly from VVAW) had a visible leading role in the antiwar movement.³³⁰ A primary goal of the Winter Soldier Investigation was to draw a distinction between ‘the warrior’ and the ‘war’ and hold the military and civilian military planners accountable for the atrocities and the war. One of the most common criticisms of the hearings is the fact that the veterans publicly testifying claimed to have refused to participate in military inquiries into their allegations, and therefore critics argue the testimony’s veracity is suspect.³³¹ It was precisely because the organizers of the WSI did not want the testimony to result in the isolation of culpability to individual soldiers that cooperation with the military was refused by participants.³³² Yet the idea that the nation, and particularly the antiwar movement, mistreated veterans of the war has been a powerful memory reinforced through countless cultural sources. There is little reason to doubt the stories of a

³³⁰ Andrew E. Hunt, *The Turning: A History of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 2.

³³¹ Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 316-317; Norman Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam*, 182; Bruce Palmer Jr, *The 25-Year War: America’s Military Role in Vietnam* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984), 86; Hay Parks in *Facing My Lai: Moving Beyond the Massacre* ed. David L. Anderson, 133; B.G. Burkett and Glenna Whitley, *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation Was Robbed of its Heroes and its History*, 131-133. Steven W. Mosher, “When Vietnam Protests Turned Violent” *Human Events* 1 November, 2004, 1095; Mackubin Thomas Owens, “But Was it True?” *National Review* 23 February, 2004, 37. All of these sources are a repetition of Lewy’s original work. Lewy has been the sole source for this accusation since the 1970s and is cited by conservatives regularly when they address the VVAW and atrocity stories. In *America in Vietnam* Lewy made a very brief argument about a number of the veterans being pretenders, and he cited a Naval Criminal Investigative Services document in support of his argument. The document was not publicly available at the time of his research (he was granted limited access to some classified material while researching his book – this is one of the problems of his research according to his critics) and the document has since been ‘lost’ by the navy. Since writing his book he has reportedly admitted to not having had first hand access to the document. When interviewed by Gary Kulik, Lewy stuck by his original story, and provided, for the first time, the names of 8 men he claimed were fakes. Kulik followed up on the names and discovered two had never testified at the WSI and three others (Randy Floyd, Paul Olimpieri, Thomas Heidtman) are confirmed to have been at the WSI. That leaves only three names that simply cannot be confirmed: a very weak evidentiary base for decades of insisting the WS were a ‘bunch of phonies.’ Yet the claim is persistently made by those who wish to maintain a positive memory of the war, and to demonize the antiwar movement. Gary Kulik, *“War Stories”: False Atrocity Tales, Swift boaters, and Winter Soldiers – what Really Happened in Vietnam* (Dulles: Potomac Books, 2009), 100-102.

³³² Andrew E. Hunt, *The Turning: A History of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 62. Deborah Nelson’s examination of the declassified CID documents reveals that many of the participants did in fact cooperate with CID investigators privately, providing specific details about their public testimony. This, of course, further undermines the criticism above. Deborah Nelson, *The War Behind Me: Vietnam veterans Confront the Truth About U.S. War Crimes*, 3, 146.

small minority of veterans who do recall bad experiences upon their return home, but these anecdotal experiences must be weighed against the sum of historical records. The mistreated veteran trope is actually more of a retrospective invention than a reflection of historical realities. Over time it has gained wider acceptance as one of the enduring ‘tragedies’ of the war.³³³ In fact, there is evidence that suggests few returning veterans felt mistreated by civilians who did not participate in the war. The 1971 VA study also offered the following statement and asked respondents to rate their level of agreement: “Coming home was a big letdown because so few people appreciated the service you had put in.” Sixty-seven percent of veterans were split between ‘disagree[ing] somewhat’ and ‘disagree[ing] strongly,’ with the majority choosing the latter option. Only thirteen percent “agree[d] strongly.”³³⁴ Ironically in the case of My Lai, it was ‘*pro-war*’ conservatives who were more apt to locate responsibility for the massacre in the hands of individual soldiers. The military itself was also keen to limit liability for atrocities to individual soldiers. More left leaning critics of the war and much of the vocal antiwar population were quite specific about not blaming soldiers for atrocities or the war. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, the My Lai massacre is still cited by writers as a significant source

³³³ For example, see B.G. Burkett and his book *Stolen Valor*. Burkett is a veteran of the Vietnam War and his book is an embodiment of this idea in a number of ways. As the title suggests, he feels that Vietnam veterans have mostly been maligned and cast in pathetic stereotypes that he strongly rejects. A large component of his book is dedicated to drawing a distinction between supposedly ‘real’ veterans who “had too much pride to be seen in public unkempt, stinking of alcohol, wearing threadbare military garb” – unlike the supposedly ‘phoney’ veterans whose service records are, in Burkett’s view, suspect because of this apparent lack of pride. He blames these “liars and wannabes” for being complicit in the creation of a national myth about Vietnam veterans as victims. B.G. Burkett and Glenna Whitley, *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation Was Robbed of its Heroes and its History*, xxv, xxvii.

³³⁴ The same study indicates that, even within their own age group (college age), only 3% of Vietnam veterans described their return as “not at all friendly.” Congress of the United States, Senate Committee on Veteran’s Affairs, “A Study of the Problems Facing Vietnam Era Veterans on their Readjustment to Civilians Life” 31 January, 1972, 42. A portion of this document is also cited in Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam*, 68.

of contempt towards veterans. The idea is easily understood, but it depends upon myths that do not hold up under closer scrutiny.

There have been many sources of victimization in narratives that cast the Vietnam veteran as a victim. The narrative of mistreatment at home explains one source of victimization, one that also conveniently helps to corroborate the revisionist ‘stab in the back’ theory. But an important part of the story of the American fighting soldier in Vietnam is the nature of the combat in this particular war. Guerrilla warfare is supposed to have strained the wits, sanity, and morals of American GIs, and put them in situations that bred atrocity. This particular element of the Vietnam experience is a much more fundamental part of Vietnam War narratives than the My Lai massacre, but the massacre plays an important role in supporting this idea. In *Understanding and Teaching the Vietnam War* a chapter titled “Putting Students in ‘Their Shoes’” offers the following didactic narrative of the massacre for high school teachers to incorporate into Vietnam War lesson plans: “Some American soldiers, frustrated by fighting against guerrillas and by losing fellow soldiers to booby traps and ambushes, started committing atrocities by killing civilians. The most well known [*sic*] atrocity is the My Lai Massacre. Lieutenant William Calley was convicted of a war crime for the massacre.”³³⁵ Although problematic for a number of reasons, this narrative is a good representation of the way the massacre is remembered. Stories about old women with hand grenades, children who set booby-traps, and snipers – the notorious ‘invisible enemy’ - can be found throughout scholarly and popular accounts of the war, and possibly most-often as context or even explanation in accounts of atrocities. “The conflict in Vietnam was a guerilla war without front,” begins Lewy in his treatment of atrocities in Vietnam, “and this created a setting especially conducive to atrocities.” Most accounts of the

³³⁵ Kevin O’Reily, “Putting Students in ‘Their Shoes’: A Decision-Making Approach to Teaching the Vietnam War” in *Understanding and Teaching the Vietnam War*, 53.

massacre contextualize it within a story of GIs suffering mounting casualties at the hands of an ‘invisible enemy.’ Calley himself, upon his conviction said the massacre had occurred “when my troops were getting massacred and mauled by an enemy I couldn’t see, I couldn’t feel, and I couldn’t touch.”³³⁶ There are several interviews in which other participants in the massacre expressed similar ideas about the frustrations of trying to confront an enemy who refused to fight on terms that favoured the U.S. tactics and equipment, or as Addicott and Hudson put it, “an enemy who hid behind women and children and would not come out in the open to do battle.” The communists “deliberately focused on becoming the unseen enemy, [and]...illegally took advantage of the American respect for the law of war.”³³⁷ Fred Widmer explains, “You can’t fight, there’s nothing to fight. You can’t fight a mine. You can’t fight a booby trap....Your mindset has to change...your attitude towards the villagers, now, everybody’s an enemy. Finally, you just throw the rulebook away.”³³⁸ The Peers Report and the testimony of GIs present during the massacres are probably the most influential original sources for the idea that the particular conditions of guerrilla combat in Vietnam was a “significant factor” contributing to the massacres.³³⁹ Presumably because the violence committed by Americans in Son My is so hard to mentally digest this idea is given added weight (‘why else would they have done it?’). In this

³³⁶ William Calley quoted in Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 338.

³³⁷ Major Jeffrey Addicott and Major William Hudson Jr. “The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Of My Lai: A Time To Inculcate The Lessons” 166, 173.

³³⁸ Fred Widmer in PBS American Experience: My Lai, Program Transcript, 2010, 9. Online: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/transcript/mylai-transcript/>. Accessed 3 January, 2014. Elsewhere he explains “Here you are fighting an enemy who doesn’t follow the Geneva Convention but you have to abide by it....You reach a point where you snap...you are a completely different person.” Drew Lindsay, “When Soldiers Slaughter,” *Military History Quarterly* (Autumn 2012), 54. Presumably the “rulebook” to which Widmer refers is the one so many of his fellow soldiers admitted to not having read. Several soldiers testified to minimal training regarding the handling of civilians and only cursory awareness of the contents of rule cards distributed to GIs outlining the treatment of prisoners and other rules of combat. Of course they were not impelled to read them either. See RDAR Volume 2, Book 24, Conti-5,6,7; Carter-3,4,5; Bacon-Summary of Testimony. (Actual testimony is redacted.) Book 25, Olsen-4,9; Buchanon-94; Lee-22.

³³⁹ RDAR Volume 1, 8-4.

regard My Lai becomes an ambiguous tale that is as much about the actions of Americans, as it is about how tough the conditions were and possibly also about the immorality of Vietnamese fighters.

Robert Mann writes that “in many respects, My Lai had been inevitable – the tragic and deadly result of sending heavily armed, emotionally frayed young men into a guerrilla war in which they could not distinguish between civilians and the Viet Cong.”³⁴⁰ Mann’s description, or any number of other similar descriptions, are not totally devoid of any truths about the war. With so many veterans recalling experiences related to this aspect of the war, it is obviously an important part of their experience and memory. But in the case of the attack of Son My, emphasizing this suggests there may have been an element of confusion over the status of the occupants of Son My, or that the massacres were carried out by GIs in an uncontrolled psychotic frenzy. There was no confusion that morning; the soldiers of TF Barker were killing unarmed civilians and they knew it. They also knew they were not in any danger, and it is also highly probable they knew their actions were unambiguously wrong, even if they were under the impression their commanders expected it from them.³⁴¹ To suggest the massacre was inevitable is particularly troubling. It is a very rare account of the massacre that does not contextualize it in a similar manner to that of Widmer’s account: the men suffered increasing losses against enemy soldiers who did not fight fairly, and who were indistinguishable from civilians, and as a result American GIs were driven to a state uncontrollable frustration. Thus the massacre is explained

³⁴⁰ Robert Mann, *A Grand Delusion: America’s Descent into Vietnam*, 649.

³⁴¹ There are traces throughout the Peers testimony that suggest the men were well-aware what they were doing was wrong by any standards. Certainly, after the massacres, even before anyone outside of the Task Force had any concrete details, the attempts to cover it up indicate this. For example, see Herbert Carter’s testimony to the Peers Inquiry, RDAR Volume 2, Book 24, Carter 44. Upon seeing Haeberle during the course of the attack on Thuen Yen, one soldier had the presences of mind to warn his accomplices, “Hey, watch out, He’s got a camera.” These are not the words of someone who believes they are operating within the law. Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 132. The fact that so many of the men took time out from killing to rape women and girls suggests they did not feel they were in imminent danger.

as the outcome of engaging American troops in guerrilla warfare against vicious criminal enemy for which they were not adequately prepared. James Olson writes that “the troops in My Lai found themselves battling a determined enemy where distinctions between friend and foe, soldier and civilian, blurred.” One can only assume he is writing from the soldiers’ perspective. Even still, this is an absurd exaggeration of the problems of guerrilla warfare misapplied to My Lai. Earlier in the same text Olson makes the point that American GIs harboured racist thoughts about the Vietnamese and even considered them inhuman.³⁴² Many other observers have made similar comments and this was one of the conclusions in the ‘Peers Report.’ But if this was the case, then it is just as likely the troops were indifferent to the distinction between civilian and soldier as blind to it; in many cases they probably simply did not care.

This ambiguity argument fits within the larger, predominantly conservative, narrative that casts any hint of American wrongdoing within the context of a litany of communist violations of laws of war and crimes against humanity. This ‘explanation’ is often offered with an addendum that it is not intended to justify or to minimize the guilt of the soldiers involved, merely to explain. But it does more than ‘explain’ (if it even explains anything in this case) – it most certainly is intended to mitigate. South Korea’s General Chae Myung Shin acknowledged this without hesitation when, referring to the nature of guerrilla warfare and Calley’s role in the massacre, he said “I can understand [how] that happened. Calley tried to get revenge for the deaths of his troops. In war, this is natural.”³⁴³

What lesson can be drawn from this assessment of the massacre? It does service the notion that U.S. soldiers were victims of the war. It suggests they were victims of these

³⁴² James Olson, “My Lai Massacre” in *Encyclopedia of Military Science* ed. G. Kurt Piehler (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2013), 921.

³⁴³ “The Cold Warrior,” *Newsweek* (10 April, 2000), 34.

conditions, but more importantly, it suggests they were victims of a military strategy that placed them in an unwinnable situation. Further, this context for the massacre situates it as one of the horrible outcomes of engaging the U.S. military in a ‘limited’ counter-insurgency war. Those who subscribe to a revisionist interpretation of the war that condemns this strategy for supposedly leading inevitably to defeat can therefore hold the massacre up as part of the larger lesson of what happens when the military is forced to fight ‘with one hand tied behind its back.’ Addicott and Hudson do just this when they write, “the United States military never was allowed to take the war to the real enemy - North Vietnam.” Thus in their view, “My Lai actually was made possible because of the total and complete absence of a grand strategy to deal with the communist-sponsored aggression against South Vietnam....[T]he United States typically refused to use its overwhelming might.”³⁴⁴ Although such an explicit connection between this particular revisionist account of the war and the My Lai massacre is rare, the underlying logic of it is simple enough to appear self-evident. Harry Summers was unambiguous in his criticism of those involved in the My Lai massacre, and he did emphasize the poor leadership and discipline within the Americal Division, but he also saw the massacre as an unfortunate outcome of civilian leadership of the military’s strategy. He characterized (somewhat controversially) the Vietnam War as primarily conventional and disagreed with the civilian leadership’s strategic decision to treat the war as a guerrilla war.³⁴⁵ In his view My Lai was one of the results of misusing the military in Vietnam; the military fell victim to a misguided civilian concocted strategy. Summers’s analysis was at least partially successful in the way it helped shift attention from

³⁴⁴ Major Jeffrey Addicott and Major William Hudson Jr. “The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Of My Lai: A Time To Inculcate The Lessons” 165, 172, 173.

³⁴⁵ *Facing My Lai: Moving Beyond the Massacre* ed. David L. Anderson, 119-120, 134-135, 156. Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context*.

atrocities like Son My to the supposed failures of the civilian concocted strategy.³⁴⁶ In a similar vein to Addicott and Hudson he thought low troop morale was symptomatic of what he deemed to be poor leadership and a lack of clear objective from Washington which is an important factor in explaining the massacre. In essence: war is a serious business and the manner in which it is executed is best left to experienced soldiers who will not hesitate to win. While at the Tulane University conference on My Lai in 1994, Summers spoke of the importance of moral courage, but he was not making his point in reference to the moral choices the men of TF Barker faced. Instead he was speaking of the moral courage that he thought is required of military officers to risk their careers and “speak up” against flawed strategy from civilian leadership. He thinks his generation of officers learned from the failure of leadership at the highest levels in Vietnam which “set off this renaissance that ended up with the army and the military that you have today, which in my mind is probably the finest military we’ve had in the nation’s history.”³⁴⁷

Histories of the massacre have incorporated and aided in the development of various national myths. From a cross section of representations of the My Lai massacre the following ideals or lessons can be extracted. *Americans hold their military to the highest standards of morality and conduct, and there are devastating consequences when such standards are not met, or worse, when the public is led to believe such standards are not being met. Despite this respect for the rules of warfare, atrocities do occur in war. Americans must understand that isolated incidents of violations by American troops may occur when they are facing an enemy that does not have the same respect for the rules of warfare. However, there should be no doubt*

³⁴⁶ Lawrence R. Rockwood, “The Lesson Avoided: The Official Legacy of the My Lai Massacre” in *The Moral Dimension of Asymmetrical Warfare Counter-terrorism, Democratic Values and Military Ethics*, 198.

³⁴⁷ Harry Summers in *Facing My Lai: Moving Beyond the Massacre*, 159.

that if such incidents do occur, the American military will investigate and hold the guilty responsible, regardless of the political and strategic costs. For these reasons it is imperative that at times of war the military must be allowed to fight the type of war its experienced military leaders deem appropriate. Finally, do not forget the heroes: these are the people that deserve to be remembered, and this is the type of memory that properly recognizes the achievements of America's veterans. The massacre's history and memory most certainly has been converted into a usable past. Indeed, the most frequent occasions of public recollection – at anniversaries and times that call for historical parallels – are precisely the occasions that call for 'lessons from the past.' It is unfortunate that more meaningful lessons that revolve around responsibility and reconciliation, and are less rooted in ethnocentrism have not been extracted from the massacres at Son My.

Conclusion

At the commemoration ceremony of the fiftieth anniversary of the Vietnam War, Barack Obama recently proclaimed there is still no consensus on the war. Its “complexity,” he said, has rendered historical judgment ambiguous. Yet he was sure of one thing: Vietnam is a painful part of American history “most particularly, [because of] how we treated our troops who served there.... [They] were sometimes blamed for the misdeeds of a few men, when the honorable service of the many should have been praised.... [They] came home and were sometimes denigrated... It was a national shame, a disgrace that should have never happened.”³⁴⁸ Although Obama did not refer to My Lai specifically, he did not have to; it is hard to imagine it was not precisely the sort of ‘misdeed’ to which he was referring, or that it was not the image conjured in the minds of his listeners. After all, the My Lai Massacre is the archetypal American ‘misdeed’ of the war. The conservative theme of conflating a respect for veterans with a revisionist history of the war seems to be a bipartisan exercise. Thus even a president who has been thoroughly vilified by conservatives subscribes to a conservative memory of the war that perpetuates the muffling of contentious memories while identifying American veterans as the real victims of the war.

Throughout this thesis I have used the referent “My Lai Massacre” to refer to the mythic memory of what happened in Son My on 16 March, 1968. I argue that it is a fitting referent for the way it captures the ethnocentrism of the memory in the name by perpetuating an American misnomer rooted in ignorance. It also singularizes the scope of horrors of the day, and fails to differentiate ‘the massacre’ from the domestic turmoil with which it was conflated. The name

³⁴⁸ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at the Commemoration Ceremony of the 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War” Washington D.C. 28 May, 2012.

“My Lai” conjures images of American brutality in Vietnam for sure, however, it is equally reminiscent of William Calley’s court-martial and domestic turmoil about the war. The My Lai narrative has always been tangled up in the larger narrative of the Vietnam War and America’s role. In some ways arguments about My Lai are representative of more fundamental ideas about the war. As it quietly slipped into the past, ideas about My Lai have come to symbolize even more – possibly even becoming subsumed within the discourse about “the sixties.”

Unfortunately as the scope of ideas the My Lai Massacre is charged with representing increases, the relevance of the myth to the actual massacres in Son My seems to decrease.

Despite the hold liberal orthodox scholarship has on the history of the war, there remains within it, I have argued, a conservative trend regarding the massacres in Son My. Reactions, explanations, and rationalizations that appeared in early conservative responses to news of the massacres have survived into a wider ideological spectrum of Vietnam scholarship and memory than that from which they came. The shift in focus among orthodox scholars away from the moral and criminal dimension of the war, has somewhat marginalized the antiwar arguments about such aspects of the war. Furthermore, although within academic circles revisionists’ scholarship never really took hold, aspects of their arguments did infiltrate more popular discourse. Conservatives were successful in intertwining an uncritical memory of the war with respect for American service men and women. The contemporary critique of the war, especially that which pertained to American conduct in Vietnam was blamed for the much of the difficulty many Americans, including veterans themselves, believed Vietnam vets faced since the end of the war. Attempting to reconfigure the narrative of the My Lai Massacre to be more representative of the massacres in Son My, and to propose that such misdeeds by America have

yet to be properly addressed, simple could not rally a constituency in the same way such easily digestible professions of ‘moving beyond’ and ‘healing.’

This ‘muffling,’ as it has been called elsewhere, manifests itself in different ways with regards to the massacres. It has relegated them to a bit-part in the narrative of the war. Most surveys of the war, regardless of interpretive school, only mention ‘My Lai’ in passing. Whether these authors are explicit about it or not, their cursory treatment of the massacres suggests it explains little about the war. There is also a distinct weariness to many accounts of the My Lai Massacre that gives me the impression some writers feel it is a tired and somewhat clichéd element of the Vietnam War narrative. In many cases it is contextualized within a discussion of the home front, and the antiwar movement. There is an embarrassing frequency of simple factual errors for which there is little explanation other than limited research into easily available sources that is symptomatic of a lack of intellectual interest. In other words, the subtext seems to be, *‘The story has been told – what more is there to say?’*

Exceptionalist arguments about the nature of the My Lai Massacre rest on a partial or simplified understanding of the facts: that is, the blasé attitude towards the details of My Lai tends to perpetuate exceptionalist narratives. Ignoring the nature of the American war in Quang Ngai at that particular point in time, erasing the actions of B Company in My Hoi, focusing on the role of individual characters and very particular acts while obscuring other details of the massacres, intertwining the massacre with Calley’s court case, and other factual indiscretions each play a role in casting ‘My Lai’ as an exceptional even in the war.

Memories of My Lai were once again conjured by the media during America’s most recent invasion of Iraq. It appears to have been almost irresistible for journalists and pundits to raise the spectre of My Lai in news reports of the atrocities in Haditha, (disposing of any claim

that My Lai is simply forgotten) but there seems to have been an equally strong desire to tear down such allusions after making them. The *Washington Post* printed the headline “Haditha Killings Recall Vietnam’s My Lai” and opened the article with several similarities, adding “the circumstances are eerily similar.” However, the article goes on to suggest the similarities are only superficial and the real significant difference lie in the fact that *because* of My Lai “today’s troops are much better educated, trained and disciplined.”³⁴⁹ Therefore comparisons between the two atrocities, according to this viewpoint, are ill-informed. It suggests that conditions leading to the massacres were similar, but the soldiers in Iraq were volunteers and much more professional. Yet the article does not suggest how one should interpret this difference. An NPR story addressed the parallels journalists and pundits were drawing in the media and drew similar conclusions to the *Washington Post*: “Haditha won’t be My Lai mainly because My Lai happened.” Apparently, according to NPR’s guest speaker, retired Major General Robert Scales, the lesson learned from My Lai is that “the object of modern wars isn’t to overcome tyrants or to conquer territory, but to shape opinions and win the allegiances of alien peoples.” Additionally a further lesson that My Lai is supposed to have offered is that there are serious consequences when the rules of war are broken, not just by “dictators” (the enemy), but also by “Lieutenants and non commissioned officers” (Americans), and such crimes must be swiftly addressed.³⁵⁰ Of course these lessons rest on the assumption that there *were* serious consequences for America after the My Lai massacre. Although not explicitly stated there is a subtle suggestion that My

³⁴⁹ Richard Pyle, “Haditha Killing Recall Vietnam’s My Lai” *Washington Post* 2 June, 2006. For other articles drawing comparisons or refuting them see Alex Vernon, “The Road From My Lai” *New York Times*, 23 June, 2006. William F. Buckley Jr. “My Lai Again?” *National Review* 17 July, 2006, 50. “Probing a Bloodbath” *Newsweek* 147-24 (12 June, 2006). Fred Barnes, “The My Lai Lie – Behind the Coverage of Haditha” *The Weekly Standard* 11-40 (3 July, 2006).

³⁵⁰ Retired Major General Robert Scales in “Parallels Between My Lai, Haditha Are Few” NPR 2 June, 2006. Online: <http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=5448299>. Accessed 15 June, 2014.

Lai is somehow linked to America losing the war. Put another way, the lesson appears to be that victory is dependent upon managing the optics of war. In this regard Scales shares a similar understanding of the massacre with Addicott and Hudson (see p.116). Putting aside the various supposedly false similarities, there is at least one similarity between the atrocities committed by Americans in 1968 and 2006 that seems to have escaped many observers: concern for the fate of the accused and concocting various formulas for rationalization overshadowed discussions about the real victims, accountability, and reconciliation.

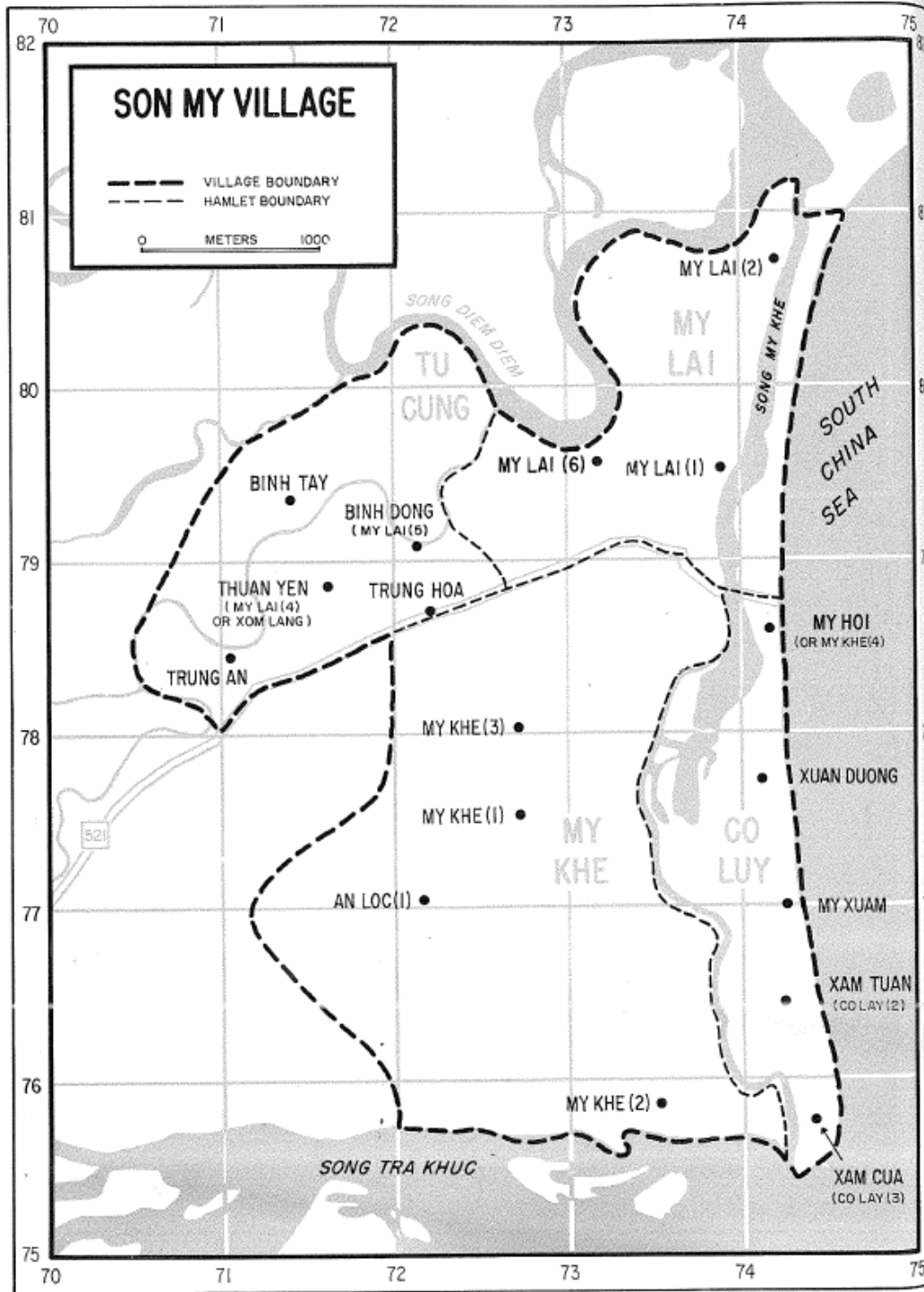
The limited and hazy understanding of the massacres, coupled with their rather quick recession from public interest after the Calley trials wound down, and the very nature of the atrocities suggests that 'My Lai' is not the sort of memory from which useful lessons can be drawn. Yet clearly, memory of the massacre does indeed function as a lesson point in many narratives of the war. Most of these lessons tend to emphasize the impact of public response to the massacre on the outcome of the war with the purpose of demonstrating the intolerance of Americans to wanton violence committed in their name, or the influence of the media on the outcome of the war. Attempts to use the massacre to substantiate bias media claims are as fallacious as arguments that cite the massacre as major source of outrage that lead to the public turning against the war. In most cases the lessons that are drawn tend to obscure the real cause of public outrage regarding the massacre, which was a struggle over the apportioning of blame in America and American victimization.

There is a historiography of the Son My massacres that cuts through the facile arguments and misunderstandings of what the US Army did in Quang Ngai in 1968. Unfortunately the finding and conclusions of much of this scholarship have not been disseminated into broader accounts of the war in Vietnam that touch of the massacres (or more often massacre). Newly

declassified documentary sources such as the Vietnam War Crimes Working Group files reflect on a much broader time and space of the war and could alter the way the massacres in Son My are contextualized. The VWCWG files have already spawned a small resurgence in interest in Vietnam War crimes and atrocities. How this might lead to a reconfiguring of the My Lai Massacre narrative is yet to be seen.

Appendix

Image 1: Son My Village.



Sketch 3-2 of the Report of the Department of the Army Review of the Preliminary Investigations into the My Lai Incident, Volume 1: The Report of the Investigation, 14 March 1970.

Image 2: *Esquire* Cover, November 1970.

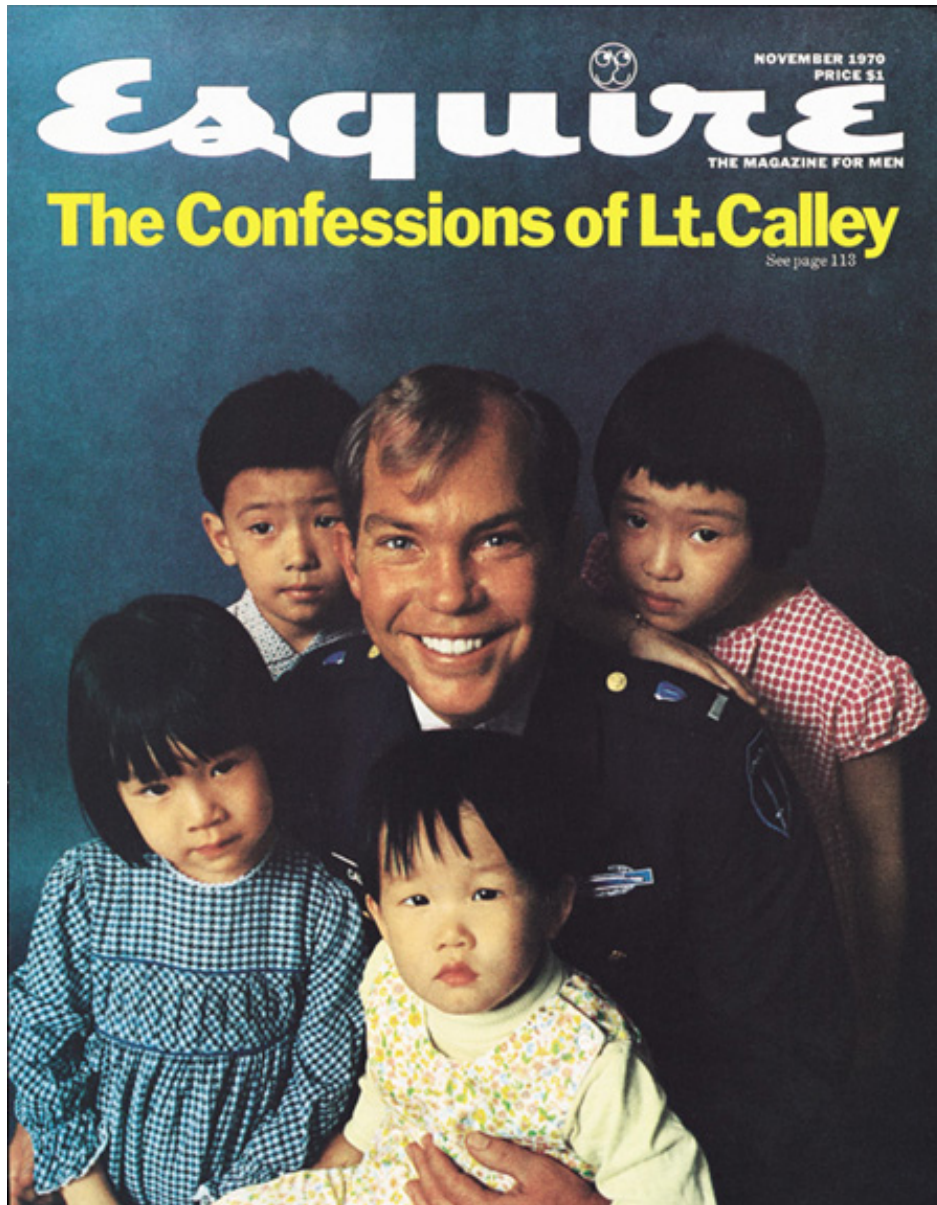
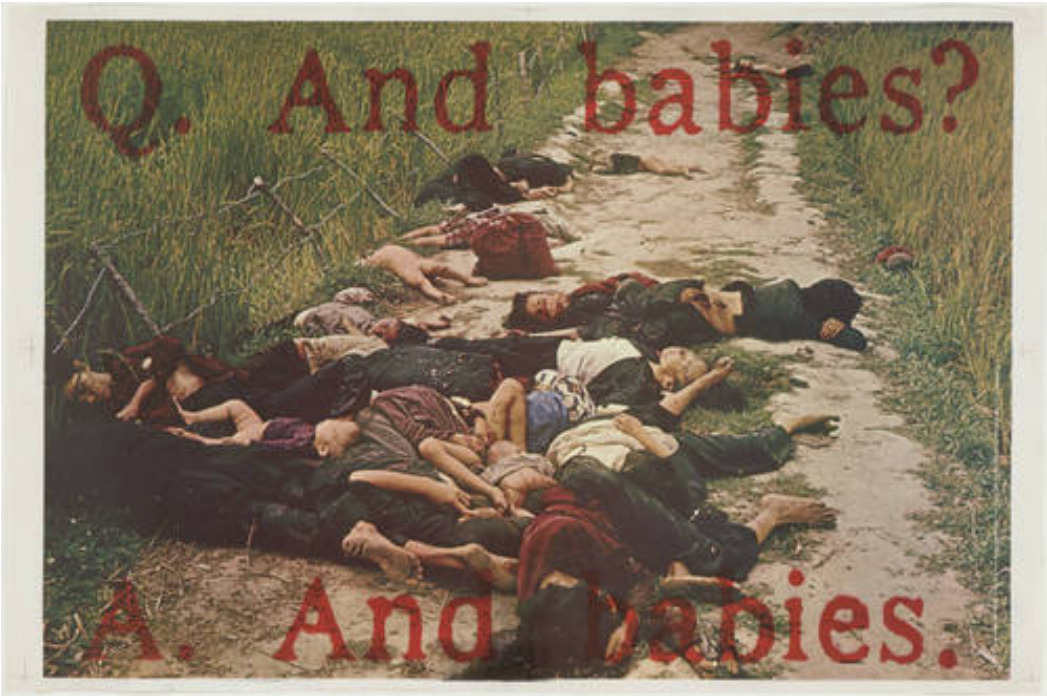


Image 3, Art Workers' Coalition "Q. And Babies? A. And Babies." 1970.



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