

# My lai – culpability of guilt

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Series Vietnam: A Television History. The soldier was describing the reasons why the American soldiers turned on the civilians whom they were sent to protect during the Vietnam War. The same soldier would start sobbing uncontrollably as he would go on to state, " You don't remember the enemy that you shot and killed. But you always remember the 58 year old woman you shot and killed because she was running away. And she was running away because you were threatening to shoot her."

The Vietnam War was no more ugly than any other war in history, but it was the first war that had aired uncensored on American television. This time, there would be no illusory tales of grandeur that would put mythic heroics onto the exploits after they war came to a close. The blood of the Vietnam War had been captured for eternity. " Although popular sentiment among the lower classes for the [North Vietnamese Army] was not strong, there was still a great desire for independence." (Morrison 17)

This is not to say there were no noble intentions or heroic actions. Many Americans served their country honorably and in a noble manner. Their deeds, however, would forever be overshadowed by the atrocities committed by American soldiers who assaulted a free fire zone in the town of My Lai, a town that was primarily occupied by civilian women and children.

The soldiers that went to Vietnam were normal, everyday young adults. Some were volunteers and some were conscripted, but none were murderers before they went to Vietnam. Even under the conditions of war, they did not easily crack or lose their humanity, yet, for some reason they snapped under pressure and followed orders that resulted in the death of many innocent

civilians. Were they entirely guilty for their actions or were their actions justifiable under the conditions of war? Did the directives of their superiors absolve them of guilt? Was the stress they were under a driving force behind their decisions? Or had the military's policy of dehumanizing the enemy play the vital role in their decisions? Most of all, would these factors absolve them of guilt?

In order to understand the culpability of guilt, one needs to clearly understand what actually occurred in the village of My Lai on the day of the incident.

March 16th, 1968: A company of the 23rd Infantry Division commanded by Lt. William Calley slaughters 347 unarmed civilians (including a dozen babies as young as one month of age) at the hamlet of Song My (My Lai 4) in Vietnam's southern zone. Although Calley's superiors observe the massacre from helicopters and its true nature known to higher ups, it is falsely cast as an intense firefight in which 128 "enemy soldiers" were killed. Only when a former soldier forces the incident into public view a year later is an extremely limited official investigation initiated. (Churchill 141)

Needless to say, this description hardly sounds as if there is a lack of guilt on the part of the soldiers. This description of the incident also points the finger at the higher ups in the military and places blame on those who were knowledgeable about the incident, as they not only did nothing to punish those who took part in the incident, but so casually ignored the massacre, that it would appear that such an incident may not have been entirely out of the ordinary.

What is it that would lead the soldiers to launch such a massive offensive against the civilians? What reduced the moral qualms about taking such violent action against noncombatants? Part of the reason is an issue that is endemic to all military conflicts.

Throughout the history of warfare throughout the world, there needs to be a certain instillation of a psychological attitude into a soldier in order to make the soldier acceptable to taking part in such wide-scale slaughter. This psychological instillation involves the dehumanization of the enemy in the eyes of the soldier. That is, the enemy is never portrayed as a human being. Rather, the enemy is always presented in a derogatory manner so as to appear less than human.

After all, it is much easier to kill someone who is not seen as “someone”, but rather seen as “something”. In Vietnam, the soldiers were generally referred to under the derogatory term as “gook”. (Davis) As such, they are not presented as a real person, but rather as an object of a subhuman animal. For years, this was considered necessary or the troops may have not taken full action when in a combat situation. However, such derogatory attitudes also remove a great deal of the moral qualms that soldiers may have during situations where moral qualms might be necessary in order to make the judgment calls that would be required in a situation that needs restraint.

Further complicating the matter is the fact that as the Vietnam War dragged on, many of the members of the military were drafted. They were not “real” soldiers so they were far more prone to cracking under the pressure of the highly brutal Vietnam conflict. It was an ugly war and many “average”

people off the street were rushed through boot-camp and then off to the jungles of Southeast Asia. Such inexperience and reservations to combat combined with an out of control war have all the elements for mental breakdowns and psychological behavior. " A complete lack of understanding of the terrain and the culture of the people who inhabited contributed to the chaos." (Windrow 55)

This, of course, leads to the very important question, " Does this absolve the individuals who committed the atrocities of guilt?" Under the letter of the law, the answer is absolutely not. The random slaughter of civilians is not justifiable under any circumstances. There simple is no " good excuse" or a deliberate act of genocide. This guilt, however, does not mean that one should not examine the reasons behind the creation of the environment that lead to the deliberate massacre. Military and international law (drawing from precedents derived from the Nuremberg trials) clearly states that " following orders" is not an acceptable defense for a war crime.

Much of the problems with the war in Vietnam were directly related to the American populace's total misunderstanding of Vietnam and its history. Vietnam had fought several centuries long war of independence with the Chinese. It also fought a hundred years war with French colonialists and also occupying Japanese forces. The country's goals were to free itself from foreign rule. While the United States saw itself as liberating the nation from communism, the general population simply wanted self determination.

While the communist regimes that ended up controlling Vietnam were as brutal, if not worse, than the foreign occupying forces, at the time, the "

hearts and minds" of the people were not with the American forces so the war quickly became a situation that was not winnable for the US troops. As such, the war trudged on without any clear goal or end in sight. Only two viable options existed to end US involvement: withdraw and surrender; or drop an atomic bomb on Hanoi. The third option, perpetual aerial and ground war, simply dragged on forever costing an incalculable number of lives on both sides. This aerial assault also included large amounts of napalm bombs that made the landscape of war even more vicious. (Franklin) From this, the entire landscape of the Vietnam War was one of mayhem that led to unspeakable acts on both sides.

Ultimately, however, no one truly faced punishment from the massacre at My Lai. Lt. Calley saw a mere 3 ½ years of house arrest before President Nixon pardoned him. The deaths of those civilians have never been justly punished. So, was there ever a lesson that comes from these deaths?

There were many lessons that were learned from the Vietnam War, particularly lessons derived from the horror of the My Lai massacre. If anything, the My Lai massacre shows what will result from the evils of dehumanizing the enemy and not instilling a sense of clear moral guidelines in soldiers so they understand the difference between an act of war and an act of genocide.

Clearly, the military brass and the officials in the government must realize that they are culpable for such actions and must be held accountable to the public. The United States never truly recovered from the disaster of the

Vietnam War as its specter hangs over the military to this very day. Perhaps, it is haunted by the ghosts of My Lai.

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