

# The southern vietnam



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At the dawn of one day of March 1968, some parts of Southern Vietnam were attacked by scores of American soldiers. The soldiers went on a rampage, killing and destroying almost everything that came in their way animals and people alike. After the dust had settled, almost five hundred Vietnamese had lost their lives in what came to be known as the My Lai Massacre. Bodies had piled up; most of them of defenseless women and children. The disturbing part was that the locals had never made an attempt to retaliate. It is rightfully qualified as a massacre (Everett). This essay will investigate and represent the court-martial of Lt. William Calley.

The My Lai Massacre remained a dark secret to the general population for more than a year as the U. S. army tried all it could to conceal it and its perpetrators. However, this secret was uncovered by the media. The news spread like bushfire all over the world. Breaking the news was one thing; determining the perpetrators was another. After investigations, twenty six men were charged with the massacre including the officers who had subsequently covered it up. Out of all these, only one man was duly convicted: the man convicted was Lt. William Calley (Everett).

After two years since the massacre and after one of America's longest running cases, Lt. Calley was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment with hard labor. He had been found guilty of murder of twenty two Vietnamese. The decision came after almost a fortnight of deliberations. The day before the sentencing, Calley had stood before the jury claiming that he was not at fault because he was only doing what he was trained to do (Gado). The judges were not convinced by this claim.

The sentencing of Calley was met with mixed reactions from the American public who had followed the case very closely. Many of them concluded that Lt. Calley was used as the sacrificial lamb during the whole episode. They felt that his superiors should have been the ones to be held accountable for the massacre (Gado). This public outrage, perhaps, played a part in the then US President Richard Nixon view of the sentence.

Due to the massive public outcry and sympathies shown towards Calley, President Nixon ordered that Calley should be put under house arrest as he awaits his appeal. " The whole tragic episode was used by the media and the antiwar forces to chip away at our efforts to build public support for our Vietnam objectives," he wrote (Gado). Two years after the sentencing and two years under house arrest, Calley's original sentence was shortened to ten years. One year later, and after some legal battles, Calley was set free. He had been in custody for three and half years. But was president Nixon justified in commuting the sentence?

Richard Nixon's Role: Justified or Not

Although it can be concluded from the trial that probably Calley had been the sacrificial lamb all along, it cannot be lost on humanity that what he did was damn wrong. Calley cannot justify his actions, whether they were orders or not. It reaches a point where any person would use his own instincts rather than just following orders. Therefore, Lt. Calley, whether following orders or not, should have been left to own up to his actions. President Nixon should have known this and let the law take its course.

“...far from being disturbed, professional officers knew that what had happened at My Lai could never be justified. The verdict “ will help them to hold their heads high. The moral of an acquittal would have been that anything goes.”(Hammond)

Commuting Calley's sentence in effect meant that other soldiers could repeat the same actions knowing very well that the authority will always come to their rescue. This was a bad precedence as other junior officers may use the superiors' orders as justification for immoral actions like this.

President Nixon also erred when he let the public's emotions influence his view of the massacre and Calley's trial. Claiming that he had received many letters imploring him to acquit Calley he implies that he was under enormous pressure to commute the sentence. Well, the massacre was such a sensitive issue and reflected badly on the part of The USA. Therefore, rather than succumb to outside pressures he should have his own verdict.

The My Lai Massacre indeed shocked the world as it closely mirrored other inhuman acts like the Holocaust and Stalinism. As a result, the whole world had expected that the perpetrators should have been brought to book. However, the only perpetrator found guilty was acquitted. Was that to imply that America condones such beastly acts?

The judges were also confronted with some dilemmas during the trial and deliberations. We can conclude this since it took them almost a fortnight to come up with a verdict. At the time, the US Army Field Manual's standard for determining guilt was if an officer understood that he/she should disobey all orders that called for the execution of unarmed citizens. Since this standard

is applicable to all soldiers, it was not hard to convict the soldiers that failed to meet it. A soldier that would follow such orders is said to be of low grade. From this massacre it is clear that Calley was a low grade soldier, who just followed the orders. Such soldiers, the judges concurred, should be assessed by comparing their actions to how their counterparts with common grade would have done when given such orders. One judge indeed defended Calley by concluding that he was simply a low grade and he was merely following the orders as he had been trained. He deemed that Manual to be unfair to Calley and other low grade soldiers. He wanted the Manual to be changed to protect soldiers like Calley (TJSL).

The commanding officer during the massacre, Ernest Medina, is said to be incompetent and harsh. Some soldiers described him as “ a glory-hungry person...the kind of person who would have sacrificed all of us for his own personal advancement”. It is also revealed that he and Calley had a frosty relationship. That morning, it is believed to have given the soldiers vague commands especially on what they should do with women. This was the sole reason why some of the soldiers went on a killing spree (Restivo, 2006). The judges should surely have been faced with this dilemma. What would have happened to the soldiers who had not done what he desired? What about Calley specifically? Did he indeed order them to kill women and children?

During his defense, Calley says that he knew that he could be charged in a court martial if he refused to obey orders. He adds that if this disobedience happened when they are faced with the enemy, he could easily be punished by death. During his training, he was never told that he could disobey orders. If this indeed was true, the jury should have sympathized with his situation.

Although he was wrong, probably he had been misled at the time of training (Restivo, 2006).

### Conclusion

Lt. Calley's trial elicits different emotions. It is a case between obedience to your superiors and plain common sense. In this situation, perhaps Calley should have trusted his instincts and use the latter.